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Florence Stevenson

Witch's Crossing

*Could a centuries' old curse
spell the ruin of a young woman's life...?*

Black Rider of Doom—

Terror chained me to the spot as I heard a piercing neigh and the dark rider appeared behind me. Then, desperately, I began to run while the giant black horse gained on me. I knew I had no chance—that I'd be ridden down and trampled—but still I ran and as I did, there was a pounding in my ears and in my throat and, oddly, I seemed to hear the baying of bloodhounds and men yelling, "Get her . . . get the witch . . . kill the witch." I could not catch my breath. I stumbled, falling to my knees. I tried to rise, but my legs would not support me. My pursuers were almost upon me. I wanted to scream but I could not scream.

"Curse you . . . curse you . . ." Did I whisper those words or were they in the air about me? The hooves were coming nearer, thundering in my ears. They were close, very close, my pursuers, my pursuer. I could hear the snuffling pant of the horse and smell its sweat as I lay there, my face against the dry grasses and the stinging nettles, my heart pounding, pounding, as I waited for my death. . . .

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Witch's Crossing

by Florence Stevenson



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This book is affectionately dedicated to John W. Corrington, Jr., who knows all about dormer windows and Massachusetts cemeteries. His suggestions on these and other matters have been of inestimable help in writing this volume.

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Part One

Part One

Stairwells . . . orderly pits, circling or squaring down through the heart of a house. When I was small, I used to tiptoe from the nursery on the third floor to peer down—down to the front hall with its great chandelier casting its rainbow-edged beams onto the polished parquet floor. It seemed to me that I was looking into a different world: a realm peopled by beings who had nothing in common with me or my younger sister, Betsey. And when my parents came upstairs to bid us goodnight, I never connected them with those who dwelt in the stairwell. I first saw Jared Colwell from the stairwell and it was there I also glimpsed his father, Caleb Colwell. Then, when it seemed to me that I had barely learned to connect these two worlds, the men came and carried out the coffins—first one and then the other, and I, Clarissa Lovell, aged nineteen, became head of our small family—the sworn protector of my lovely and adored little sister Betsey.

When I look back on that time, nothing seems defined. It is only with the greatest concentration

that I can separate the days—that on October 12, 1870, my dear father Edmund Lovell succumbed to the virulent grippe that had spread through our small Massachusetts town—a disease to which my mother and sister also fell victim. My mother never knew of my father's passing; we decided to tell her when she was stronger, but six days later, she too was buried in the Lovell plot. Betsey survived, but she looked like a little white ghost in her small bed, and the doctor said it would only be in a warm climate that she would regain her health. It was with that necessity in mind that I went to see Caleb Colwell, who was my father's lawyer. If it had not been for Betsey, I should not have gone—I was still wracked with grief over the loss of my parents, and also, I hated Mr. Colwell. Memory sharpens from the moment when I arrived in his office and I see myself as I was at the time—in hastily sewn sable garments, waiting in the outer room, seeing but not really seeing its paneled walls, its portrait of Rupert Colwell, the founder of the venerable Colwell law firm, a white-haired patriarch whose contented expression was duplicated neither in the countenance of his son Caleb nor his grandson Jared. It was Jared's image that I was really seeing, engraved on the back of my eyes; Jared, whom I had loved all my life, or so it seemed to me during the twelve long years I had known him.

As I have mentioned, I had seen Jared first in the stairwell, which had immediately imbued him

with magic, even though in those days he had been only eleven—a slight boy with wheat-colored hair, a pale skin, and sky-blue eyes. The magic had persisted even after he had been brought to our third-floor eyrie by Mrs. James, our nurse, to stay with us while our fathers talked business below in the library.

Though time and circumstances have rendered this memory painful, I find myself unable to dismiss it; it is something I must needs examine—Jared Colwell, as he appeared in the doorway, looking as beautiful as an illustration in one of my fairy-tale books. Yes, even at eleven, he gave promise of the striking good looks he still possesses, and even at seven, I was entirely aware of them and of his charm, also a possession he has retained. He was dressed in an unusual manner—his suit was made of dark blue velvet and his shirt was silk with a ruffled, lace-edged collar. Certainly he was a contrast to the boys I saw in church of a Sunday. None of them was so richly dressed nor so beautiful, and when he began to speak, I found that none had his fine pronunciation, gained, I was to discover, from his sojourn in London, where his father had lived for the past decade, only returning to Massachusetts and his own great house in the last year.

He had returned without his wife, Eloise. She had remained in England and though in our sequestered nursery we had heard nothing about the Colwell divorce, I was aware that there was a

difference about Jared. His manner was withdrawn and his eyes somber, and after Mrs. James had left the three of us together, he made no move to greet us; he stared beyond us out the windows. I do not suppose we ever would have spoken had not Betsey darted forward to put her tiny hands on his jacket and say, "Oh, pwetty, pwetty . . ."

We all laughed then, and I was persuaded to execute a slight curtsy and say my name, which he repeated, adding punctiliously, "I am very happy to make your acquaintance. Oh, what's that?" He had glanced upward and seen the trapdoor with the ladder that you pulled down.

Betsey stared up at the ceiling. "The bogeyman lives in there," she told him solemnly.

"The bogeyman?" he echoed incredulously. "Surely you don't believe in that!"

"She's only four and doesn't know any better," I told him from the lofty eminence of my seven-going-on-eight years.

Betsey did not understand. "The bogeyman has a long nose and big sharp teeth, and if we opened that door, he'd jump out and eat us all up."

I stepped closer to Jared and, cupping my hands, I whispered in his ear, "Nurse doesn't want Betsey to climb up that ladder and go inside. She pulled it down once by standing on the table and Nurse is afraid she'll fall and break her neck. That's why she told her about the bogeyman."

"Oh," he nodded, "that is understandable." He

glanced down at Betsey and then at the trapdoor. "However, I don't quite see how such a little girl could have managed to pull down that ladder."

"Betsey's very ent . . . enter—prising," I brought out, feeling enormously pleased because I had been able to repeat Papa's observation on that particular subject.

My accomplishment made no impression on Jared. He was now contemplating the ladder. "If she could pull it down, I expect I could too," he mused. "But I presume it's not allowed?"

It was certainly not allowed, but he was regarding the forbidden device so wistfully that I had to say, "We can do it, because we're older." I even dared to add, "Nurse says so."

"I say! That's capital!" Jared exclaimed enthusiastically. Nimble, he hoisted himself onto the table and, seizing the ladder, he pulled it down. "It goes very easily," he said, bringing it to the floor. "Where does that door lead?"

"To the attic."

"Wizard!" His eyes gleamed. "Attics are splendid places." He jumped on the ladder. "Shall we have a look round?"

I gave him the answer I was to give him all the days of my childhood. "Oh, yes, let's do!" Then, as I started to follow him, I became aware that Betsey was in tears. "What's the matter?" I asked a little impatiently.

"The . . . the bogeyman will get you," she wailed. "Oh, Rissa, he'll eat you all up."

"He'll only eat you," I warned, "so don't follow us!" With that, I clambered up the ladder as Jared pushed the trapdoor back. The darkness above was daunting, but as Jared disappeared into it, I had no recourse but to follow him into a large chamber, dimly lighted by two small, narrow windows. All around me were discarded furniture, trunks, and anonymous bundles.

"I say, this is wizard!" Jared exclaimed. "It's round like a tower in a castle."

"It is a tower," I said. "There's one on the other side of Oakhurst, too."

"Oakhurst?" he questioned.

"That's the name of our house."

"Oh." He nodded. "Our house has a name, too. It's called Colwell's Crossing."

"No, it isn't," I could answer knowledgeably. "It's really Witch's Crossing."

"Witch's Crossing?" he repeated doubtfully.

"Everyone in the village calls it that."

"Why?"

"Because of the witch," I told him solemnly. "It was a long, long time ago, Nurse said—this witch came from a place called Salem to here and hid out in a barn or something, but people found out and came after her with dogs."

"Hounds," Jared corrected.

"Hounds?" I repeated.

"They call dogs hounds but go on, please."

"Hounds," I said, liking the word because it had such a round sound. "Well, the do—hounds

chased her and she ran and ran until she got to the trees that bordered your house, only there wasn't any house then, there were just lots of trees, and she fell down and the dogs came and held her until the men got her and hanged her, right on the spot! But before she died, she cursed them and the land and everything that lived and grew on it ... and all the trees withered and died."

Jared was silent a moment, then he said, "I don't believe it."

"It's true," I assured him. "Nurse says so."

"It can't be true," he insisted. "Papa says there are no witches."

"But Colwell's Crossing is accursed," I said seriously. "Terrible things keep happening there."

"What terrible things?"

"Well ..." I tried to think but I could not remember. "They just do, Nurse says so ... she says everyone in the village calls it Witch's Crossing even if your grandfather did change its name."

"They'd better not let Papa hear them," Jared said. "He'd put them all in prison."

"He couldn't!" I exclaimed.

"Oh, yes, he could. He put Mama in prison."

"He did!" I exclaimed.

He nodded solemnly. "Yes. That's why she went away, because she didn't want to stay in prison. That's what she told me." He sighed. "I

wished she'd taken me with her. I miss her so much."

I felt very sorry for him. "Won't she ever come back?"

"No, never. But I shall go to her one day when I am older." He sighed again. "I wish I could be older faster."

"I wish I could help you, but I don't see how," I said regretfully.

"Nobody can help me," he assured me. "Growing up's something you must do all by yourself."

"Rissa . . ." Betsey suddenly quavered. "Where are you?"

Startled, we both turned to find her clinging to the top rung of the ladder, looking about her with wide, frightened eyes. Jared was at her side in a minute. "You shouldn't be here," he admonished, "you're too little." Gently, he assisted her the rest of the way.

She shrank against him. "The . . . the bogey-man," she pointed a shaking finger. "I . . . I see him over there . . ."

"Silly," I exclaimed, "that's nothing but a chair. Why did you come up?"

"We'd better take her down," Jared said.

"Oh, yes, please," Betsey begged.

Much as I loved my little sister, I was angry at her that day. It had been a lovely adventure being in the attic with my new friend—and she had spoiled it. However, once we were back in the

nursery, I forgave her, because Jared said, "That was fun. May we go again sometime?"

"Oh, yes," I breathed. "Every day, if you want."

He smiled at me. "Do you know," he said, "I'm awfully glad you live so close to us."

"So am I!" I cried. I was moved to take his hand. Did I give him my heart, too? Perhaps I did—because now I was sure I had loved him forever, and up until the death of my parents, I had thought of little save Jared's return from Italy where he had been for the last two years studying architecture.

In a casket on my dressing table were packets of his letters, sent from Florence and, more recently, Rome, each assuring me that our love remained strong and that when he returned, a year hence, we should be married and set up our own establishment—on a knoll overlooking the shallows of the Housatonic, a site we had chosen before he went away.

Jared had already designed our house; a rendering of it hung on my bedroom wall, and in my mind, I had furnished each of its rooms in the graceful style of some forty years back—I abhorred the ornate pieces so many local people were buying. Jared and I had agreed our house would be simple and elegant—a marked contrast to the overblown ugliness of Colwell's Crossing, which squatted on its rise like some unwieldly animal. Its color, a mud-brown stone extending up

to a slate-gray roof, added to its hideousness, and as Jared said, it could not have been designed, it had been spewed forth upon the landscape.

Each time I saw its massive outlines, I shuddered, though probably my dislike of the place was the greater because I knew how lonely Jared had been during the ten years he spent there. His father, embittered by the scandal of his divorce, eschewed all society, concentrating on his legal practice with an intensity which, according to Papa, approached the fanatical. He seemed to have little sympathy for his son, leaving him to the care of his housekeeper, Mrs. Curtis, and to a succession of tutors. Possibly it had been Jared's resemblance to his mother that had estranged them; more likely, it was his talent for art, for Eloise Colwell was a better-than-average painter. Still, if he were not interested in Jared's talents, Mr. Colwell permitted him to study art. My parents considered this very generous in him—I did not. I could see nothing good about Caleb Colwell—he was the villain of my childhood. Not only did I share Jared's antipathy for him, I had my own private fears. I had heard he hated all women, and though, at Jared's invitation, I had been to Colwell's Crossing often enough, I always went hoping I should not see him, for I was sure his hatred must extend to little girls as well. In fact, one afternoon when meeting him unexpectedly in a passageway, I shrieked in terror and turned to flee. To my horror, he caught me by the

arm and, pulling me close to him, he stared down at me curiously.

"Surely you're not afraid of me, child?" he had demanded.

I had writhed in his grasp. "Let me go!" I wailed.

He sighed, "Very well, go." Dropping my arm, he had added wryly, "Go in peace, child."

He left me feeling vaguely ashamed of myself also very much surprised, for I had suddenly realized how very closely he resembled Jared—or rather, Jared resembled him. The eyes, though a hazel-green rather than deep blue, were the same shape, full and widely spaced—the hair, a silvered brown, sprung back from the same high forehead; the straight nose, the mouth, thin but mobile, were the same, too. Looking after him, I had had a moment when I had actually pitied him—wondering if he were not lonely, too. That, of course, had been before the quarrel that had estranged father and son—me, as well, since as a direct result of it, Jared had left Colwell's Crossing, left Massachusetts and me for Italy. With him had gone my heart and now, as I have mentioned, I no longer feared Caleb Colwell, I hated him.

"Miss Lovell!"

I stiffened. Unperceived by me, Mr. Colwell had emerged from the inner office and now he stood hatefully close to me. Reluctantly, I faced him. Again, I was struck by his resemblance to his

son. It made me resent him the more, remembering it was his fault that Jared was not with me to sustain me in my grief. It took a real effort for me to say, "How do you do, Mr. Colwell," and offer him my hand.

Taking it, he clasped it warmly as he said, "I am truly sorry for your bereavement, Miss Lovell. To lose one parent is agony enough—to lose two in such rapid succession is a heavy burden indeed. I understand, too, that your little sister has been ill. I trust she is better, now?"

"She's better," I answered, wishing I had the courage to withdraw my hand, "but the doctor says she'll not regain her health until she's sent to a warm climate."

"A warm climate?" he repeated, frowning. "Where did he suggest you take her?"

"He said we might go to Florida—or possibly the Far West, though he did say it would be as easy to go to Italy as to California . . ." I paused. I did not want to sound too eager, as I mentioned the plan nearest my heart. "I . . . I've heard Italy is very pleasant at this time of year."

His mouth tightened. I knew he must be thinking of Jared. He said, "Indeed it is, very pleasant . . . but also, Miss Lovell, such a trip would be extremely costly."

At his frown, my heart seemingly escaped its moorings in my chest and sailed to my throat. "Have . . . have we not the means?" I faltered.

He sighed and shook his head, and it was then

he told me of Papa's speculations, carried on, it seemed, for the last year. "He fell in with some very unscrupulous persons. I am sure that his worry over his finances hastened his demise," he said in conclusion. "I am also sorry that it was my task to tell you this, Miss Lovell."

I looked at him blankly. "How . . . how much is left?" I whispered.

He paused and then he sighed a second time. "Nothing, Miss Lovell—not even Oakhurst."

I had sustained many shocks in the past fortnight but this was the worst—my parents, at least, were dead, and while the wounds caused by their passing were still painful, they would heal, whereas the loss of both home and money presented problems without any solution I could envision. I said, "Oh." I could say no more and I was aware that the pounding in my throat had increased to the point where I was conscious of nothing else and, of a sudden, the walls of the office seemed to be changing shape, or was it the windows, which were losing their square contours. I put a hand to my eyes to erase the vision but even as I did, everything suddenly turned black and I felt myself falling.

Something very unpleasant was trickling down my throat. It burned and I gagged. I opened my eyes to find Mr. Colwell leaning over me holding a cut-glass decanter. He said solicitously, "Are you feeling better?"

I lay on something hard and slippery. It was, I

soon realized, the horsehair sofa I had glimpsed as I entered. I felt completely confused. "Did I faint?" I asked incredulously, adding irately, "I never faint."

A corner of his mouth twitched. "Have some more brandy, Miss Lovell," he said gently.

"No, thank you!" I returned quickly and curtly, hating myself for this show of weakness in enemy territory. "I am quite well." I started to sit up, then sank back as a wave of dizziness broke inside my head.

"Quite unwell," contradicted Mr. Colwell. "How much have you eaten today?"

"T-Today?" I echoed, a trifle uncertainly. Though Lizzie, our cook, had been sending trays up to me, I could not remember having eaten more than a nibble of toast or a sip of tea in I could not tell when, yet such was my pride that I did not want him to know it. I said, "Lizzie's been preparing excellent meals for me."

"Of which you have not been partaking," he accused. He shook his head, "It's all fallen on your shoulders—poor child."

I glared at him, "I am not a 'poor child,'" I retorted. "I shall be twenty in three weeks. Old enough to . . ." to what? To be married to his son. I did not want to say that. I did not want to hear his reply. "I am old enough to care for my sister and myself." I sat up, ignoring the swimming sensation in my head. "And I will," I continued defi-

antly. "I am well educated, I can teach or . . . or . . ."

"Shhhhh," he put his hand on my arm, pushing me gently back. "Before you think about the future, let us consider the present and the meal you obviously need."

"Lizzie will prepare . . ." I began and stopped, stricken, wondering how much longer I should be able to command her services and how much longer would I be able to live in the house that was mine no longer. And Betsey . . . what about her need for a warm climate and. . . The tears in back of my eyes threatened to spill out. Angrily, I blinked them back. I would not cry in front of my enemy.

Evidently he had read my thoughts, for he said contritely, "I should have my tongue cut out to have told you so much—so bluntly. I did not think. It's been a long time since I . . ." he paused, frowning. "No matter; if I've been ungracious, at least I can rectify matters in some little part. You'll come with me, Miss Lovell, to the Golden Buck, where we'll procure you a meal."

"Please, no . . . I must go home," I protested weakly, desiring to be away from him as soon as possible, yet, at the same time, his talk of food had unexpectedly whetted my appetite, and, much as I tried to deny it, I was extremely hungry.

He ignored my remonstrances and in a very short time, I was seated across from him at a table in the inn. A fire was burning on the hearth be-

hind us and for the second time in less than an hour, I was beset by memories of Jared, for it had been to this same hostelry that he, my parents, Betsey, and I had come to celebrate my seventeenth birthday. I had sat across from him, too, and he had toasted me in wine and later champagne. Thinking of that moment, I was sure I would not be able to eat—my grief, I knew, would choke me. However, I was wrong, for at that moment the smell from an approaching tray wafted into my nostrils and, despite my misery, my hunger increased.

The meal set before me was delicious—roast chicken, candied yams, and buttered spinach. I ate heartily of it and besides, I had new-made rolls, butter, and a large glass of milk. I was so engrossed in my repast that it was not until I was nearly through with it that I realized my companion had dined frugally on a cup of soup and a small salad. Meeting my questioning eye, he gave me a smile, heartbreakingly similar to Jared's. "You must excuse me, Miss Lovell," he said. "It's not my hour to dine."

"Oh," I mumbled. With an effort, I added, "It was kind of you to give me dinner . . . I was . . . very hungry."

"Come, finish it," he commanded.

I looked at my plate, "I've eaten so much," I demurred.

"Have the rest . . . already there's color in your

cheeks . . . which is as it should be—paleness does not become you.”

His comments did not please me—they were too familiar, I thought. I was minded to push the plate away, but I did not have the resolution and, besides, it would not have been tactful or polite. In the interests of courtesy, I had to consume the rest. That I felt much the better for it, I decided to ignore—I was determined not to be any more grateful than necessary to Mr. Caleb Colwell; yet, on the other hand, I did not want to appear entirely ungracious. “That was delicious,” I said. “Thank you, sir.”

He regarded me gravely. “I want you to promise me, Miss Lovell, that you’ll not be so foolish as to starve yourself again.”

“I shan’t. I did not know I was starving myself. There . . . there’s been so much to . . . occupy me of . . . late.” As I spoke, the events of the past weeks had crowded in upon me, and to my extreme annoyance, there had been a break in my voice. Quickly, I swallowed my emotion, but I could not forestall his pity.

“It’s been too much . . . entirely too much for such a little girl,” he said.

Little! I was stung by his comment—little was Betsey, aged sixteen, delicate of feature and of form. Little had been my mother, who had stood well under my father’s shoulder—I was tall, taller than some men—tall enough to look Jared Colwell in the eye. I was a full six inches over five

feet and even taller with my shoes on. Of course, he had not meant height, he had been talking of age, but at nearly twenty, I was accustomed to taking command in my house and indeed, I had often done so—supervising our three servants and, so said my mother, doing it far more efficiently than she. So “little” did not apply to me in any way and, in fact, its implications were enough to banish my incipient tears. I looked at Mr. Colwell steadily. “I am able to assume any duty that will be required of me, I assure you.”

“Bravely spoken, Miss Lovell,” he replied. “I admire courage more than I can tell you—it is a virtue too few of us possess.” His eyes flickered away from mine—I had the impression that his gaze had turned inward upon some image in his mind, but a second later he smiled and, much to my relief, announced, “I shall take you home now.”

It was odd that after Mr. Colwell left me, the defenses I had erected against the new fears I must needs entertain also vanished. Standing in the great hall near the curving staircase, which wound its way up to the third-floor landing, down which I, in my childhood, had peered, I was reminded of that old enchantment, and the irony of it was enough to make me laugh—albeit harshly. To a watcher from above, I could have been one of those mysterious beings who dwelt in the stairwell, but there was nothing mysterious about me.

In this year of 1870, I, Clarissa Lovell, had, in the course of a fortnight, become a penniless orphan with an ailing sister to support, I knew not how. I stared about me at the chandelier, at the fine tables in the hall, at the furniture in the adjoining parlor on my right, and at the cabinets of crystal and silver in the dining room to my left, and I imagined the rooms stripped bare—what would our possessions bring at auction and how much would our creditors claim? I expected that there would be creditors—I had heard my parents discussing the bankruptcy of a neighbor and a phrase stuck in my mind. It concerned “the cruelty of the creditors.” I tried to imagine what they would be like—businessmen of the town, of course, but I could not think of them as human—they were furtive shadows, creeping under the door. I shivered.

“Miss Clarissa, praise be that you’re home!”

Startled, I looked up in direction of the voice and met the anguished eyes of Janet, our parlormaid. My heart began to pound. “What’s amiss?”

“It’s poor Miss Betsey, she’s had a turn for the worse.”

“Betsey!” I ran up the stairs and into her room. My sister was tossing feverishly, her face was flushed and her eyes blank. “Mama . . .” she murmured fretfully. “Mama, Mama, Mama . . .”

Janet twisted her hands together. “I’ve sent Morgan for the doctor, Miss Clarissa.”

The doctor! How would we pay him and what about Janet, Lizzie, and Morgan, our handyman, who also worked in the garden? What provision could be made for them and how could I even think about such things with poor little Betsey so ill? I wanted to fall on my knees and weep. I wanted to tear my hair, but I said calmly, "When did you send for him, Janet?"

"Most twenty minutes since, ma'am."

"Good." I cried thankfully. "He should be here soon, then." I knelt beside Betsey's bed. "She'd seemed so much better, too," I sighed.

"Oh, Miss Clarissa," Janet sobbed, "she caught a chill wandering about the house after you'd left. I was down with Lizzie in the kitchen for a cup of tea . . . we didn't know she was out of her bed until we found her weeping in the front hall because she'd seen the black wreath on the door. To my mind, she hadn't quite realized your Mama and Papa were dead and gone, miss."

"Mama . . . Papa . . ." Betsey was staring at the foot of her bed—there was a bright, expectant look in her eyes, which reminded me of the times she had pleaded to be taken on an outing we had denied her. She had always gotten her way; would she get it now, too?

I grasped her hands. "You shan't go!" I cried. "You mustn't leave me, too." I had never loved her so much as at that moment. "Betsey," I said solemnly, "stay with me. I promise you'll want for nothing. I shall protect you as Mama and Papa

would have protected you. No matter what it costs me, you shall be safe. I swear this by almighty God."

"Oh, Miss Clarissa!" Janet gasped. "I'm cold all over, I do declare."

I, too, was cold, and I felt a throbbing. I did not know whether it was coming from within my head or outside of it. For a moment, I had the odd feeling that I was in the center of a great pulsating heart. The sensation disappeared almost immediately, leaving me still cold, but in a normal way—a chill was coming through the crevices in the window frame. The coverings on the bed were tumbled. I straightened them, pulling them up around Betsey's shoulders. As I did, she opened her eyes and smiled. "Rissa," she said in a half whisper, "I saw Mama and Papa."

"It was only a dream, darling," I said firmly.

"Only a dream . . ." her face quivered. "It seemed so real. They were standing there . . . at the foot of my bed. They wanted me to come with them—and I wanted to go, but—you called, and then they said I should stay." Her eyes filled with tears. "I wanted to go, Rissa. You should have let me go."

"Oh, miss, she's still out of her head," Janet moaned.

Was she? I was not sure. She had said I had called her back. Had she really heard me, or was it part of her delirium?

"Miss," Janet exclaimed, "I think I hear Dr.

Adams's carriage on the drive." She ran to the window. "Yes, he's come. I'll go let him in."

Janet and I watched anxiously while Dr. Adams examined Betsey. She did seem more alert than she had before, but when he moved away from her bed, he beckoned us to follow him into the hall. I obeyed nervously, but my fears were assuaged when I saw his smile. "She's much better!" he exclaimed. "In fact, she seems actually to have improved since I saw her this morning."

"It was Miss Clarissa did it," Janet averred. "Summoned her back from the dead, she did. I never saw anything like it."

"Um." Dr. Adams gave her a skeptical look. "She's on the mend, but she's bound to have these spells of weakness now and then, which must not be taken too seriously. As I told you, Miss Lovell, it's necessary that she have warmth and sunshine—the sooner the better."

"I shall see that she gets it," I told him, firmly suppressing the tremors in my voice and also the unbidden thought about his bill—how might I pay him? I congratulated myself that my panic was not evident in either my face or my voice as I went with him to the door.

When I returned to Betsey, I found her sleeping. She looked so young, much younger than her fifteen years—a child to be protected, and I had vowed to be her protector. Surprisingly, I felt a wave of resentment against her and against the fate that had befallen me this month. I wanted to

be free—free of all responsibilities. Flinging myself from the room, I sped up to the nursery, pushing open the door so vigorously that it slammed against the wall. A smell of dampness and dust swirled about me in that great dim room; the curtains were drawn and the furniture piled in a corner. I eyed the ladder, reachable now I was taller, but I did not pull it down. The memory of my initial meeting with Jared came back to me. I had other memories connected with the attic room—they, too, concerned Jared. We had visited it often in the early years of our friendship; it had been our secret special place until Betsey had inadvertently told Mama we were in the habit of going there, and then it had become a point of honor to avoid it. Looking up at the trapdoor, I was conscious of a great loneliness.

“Jared!” I cried, “where are you?”

If only he might have appeared, but he was across the seas in distant Italy, and in the last six months I had not even received a letter from him. All I knew was that he had been planning to meet his mother in Rome, where she had been living off and on for the last five years. I had had one letter from Rome, explaining that his mother had been in Brindisi but was due back within the week. It was to her that I attributed his silence—I tried not to resent her for it. After all, mother and son had been separated for a decade; naturally they would have had much to say—but a

six-month conversation? Angrily, I banished my incipient doubts. He would also be studying and, besides, it took a long time to receive mail from Italy.

Still, my resentment at our separation had to escape somehow. As usual, it centered around Caleb Colwell, and his kindness to me that day was forgotten as for perhaps the thousand and fifty-sixth time I thought of my last meeting with Jared. It had taken place in our summer house, at twilight on August 2nd, 1868.

Closing my eyes, I envisioned the scene—the setting sun, half hidden by the tall sycamore trees, the shadows lengthening across the garden, myself in a white dimity gown, the coolest I possessed, seated on a bench in the small, pillared “Greek” temple Papa’s father had commissioned some forty years ago. It had been a warm evening, but I had scarcely noticed the heat—I was wondering why Jared had wanted to meet here instead of in the house and why he had resorted to such elaborate precautions as sending one of his servants with a note to be delivered to me alone. Actually, it had been presented to Janet, who had passed it to me with all the air of a ladies’ maid in a mystery melodrama. The message had been terse: “Must see you, summer house, five.”

He had arrived ten minutes past the appointed hour and the look on his pale, set face had frightened me. I leaped to my feet. “What has

happened, Jared?" I cried, holding out both hands to him.

He had gripped them so hard I had had difficulty restraining a cry of pain. "I am going away, Rissa," he had said bluntly. "He wants me to go to Harvard and emerge a lawyer—all my years of art mean nothing to him. He has decided I must enter the family firm. When I told him I had no aptitude for law, he said I should acquire it. He'll brook no arguments and he laughs at the idea of me being an architect—to him, it's nothing but a pleasant pastime. I shall show him it's not. One day, I'll be as celebrated as Philip Webb or Norman Shaw or anyone designing today. I have ideas about houses, new ideas that have never been tried out before. And I shall have more when I come back——"

"Come back?" I had interrupted. "Where are you going?"

"Italy," he said.

"Italy!" I gasped.

"To Florence . . . I want to study Renaissance architecture, and there are no finer examples in all of Italy than in Tuscany. My mother's father left me a small sum—it's enough to keep me for about three years, if I am careful. I'll not ask Father for a penny, you may be assured of that!"

"Three years," I whispered dolefully. At seventeen, three years was comparable to three centuries. My face must have mirrored my thoughts, for he drew me to him.

"Rissa, Rissa, my love, I wish you might come with me, but never fear—just be patient and please wait for me."

"You . . . you need not ask me to wait for you, Jared," I had cried. "You know I'll wait until my dying day."

"Until my dying day," I repeated those words as fervently as I had on that August afternoon, but even as they left my lips, I shivered. The girl in the garden was me no longer—she had had no responsibilities beyond helping her mother manage the household and most of that work had been assumed by servants. Before me loomed a dark and shadowy future haunted by the specter of poverty. How would I manage, what could I do? By the time Jared returned, I might well be a servant myself, and he would need a rich wife.

"Oh, God," I sobbed, horrified at the thought of Jared married to someone besides myself.

"Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof."

The quotation quivered on the air. Had I heard it with my ears or with my memory? A second later, I knew it was the latter. It had been one of Mama's favorite sayings. How often she had directed it at me, adding, "You worry too much, Clarissa."

"But I can't help it, Mama," I said out loud. "What am I going to do?" At that moment, I would have given much just to hear her answer me, but of course that was impossible. Again, I was near to tears, but I did not give into them. I

told myself it was ridiculous to doubt Jared—didn't I have his loving letters, didn't I have his gold friendship ring with the tiny clasped hands. I had worn it so long it had become a part of my finger—the third finger of my right hand. And what had he said when he had given it to me—"The next one will be a diamond and you'll be my wife-to-be."

A year was not such a long time after all—it wasn't! Mama, or the part of her that was still in my memory, was right—I did worry too much. Resolutely, I left the room and went back to Betsey, who was sleeping soundly. I took my place beside her bed.

I awakened the following morning with a head full of decisions regarding Oakhurst, its furnishings, and ourselves. With the help of Janet and Lizzie, I would clean it from top to bottom, polish the furniture with beeswax, and make everything as attractive as possible to the swarms of buyers I anticipated. Then, I would write a letter to Mrs. Marshall, whose school I had attended until I was sixteen, and offer my services as a teacher. I had a few qualms about this particular decision—perhaps they would overlook my mathematics when they remembered my excellent French grammar and pronunciation, but "sufficient unto the day." I did not need to think about that yet.

Once I had dressed, I went to the attic. Without even a twinge of sentiment, I pulled down the

ladder. I had other things on my mind, namely all the furniture I expected to find. Mama had had a habit of discarding much of it merely because she had tired of it. It was a practice I deplored, for often, especially in the last two years, many of our most cherished pieces had been banished aloft—the inlaid ivory cabinet in the hall, a particularly beautiful French escritoire, a mahogany dressing table. I had protested the dressing table, only to be told that it was sadly inconvenient and that several of its drawers were sticking.

“But it’s so beautiful!” I had exclaimed.

“Beautiful is as beautiful does,” Mama had replied tartly. “A dressing table is not to be looked at—it is to be used, and once it is no longer useful, it is no longer necessary—beautiful or not!”

I had not agreed, but one could not argue with Mama—tiny and frail, she had compensated for her lack of inches by adopting an air of authority that might better have suited a general. In fact, Papa used to salute her, clicking his heels and saying, “Yes, sir—ma’am.” My eyes smarted. It was very hard for me to accustom myself to the fact that they had both gone so quickly. Yet, could one have lived happily without the other? I had always thought of them together—apart, neither seemed to have the same reality. Whenever Papa was away on business, Mama drooped like a daisy at sunset; when he returned, the change was amazing and instantaneous. Even as a small child, I had been aware of it, and now I could under-

stand it, for, since Jared had left, I had the sense of living only half a life. I shook my head. It did not do to dwell on Jared any more—in another moment, I should be wondering at his silence again—wondering if he had, indeed, forgotten . . . no, I would not even contemplate such a thing. The seas were rough in the autumn, mail ships had often been lost. The vision of a ship, half-buried in the ocean bed with fish swimming over the gaping chests of mail while the waters washed away the identifying names and addresses, made me shudder. "Sufficient unto . . ." I climbed up the ladder, pushed open the trapdoor, and crawled into the attic. Lighting the candle I had brought with me, I looked around me in growing amazement. Save for some old cobweb-spangled trunks, the long low room was empty. The shock robbed me of both breath and locomotion. I sank down on the floor and tried to understand what had happened. Had thieves come in the night to pillage our attic? Had our servants taken advantage of my preoccupation with . . . quickly, I banished this thought as unfair to them and unworthy of me. There was really only one possible explanation and it lay with my parents, more specifically, my mother, who had been selling her precious heirlooms to help maintain a household depleted by my father's monetary losses!

A shred of conversation flitted through my mind. It substantiated my conclusions and it opened another frightening area of speculation. I

had been sitting in her room watching her dress for a party and I had said, "Mama, why do you never wear your cameo set any more? It's so beautiful."

Her back had been toward me and it seemed to me that she had stiffened, but her tone had been casual, even offhand, "Oh, you know how I tire of *things*, Clarissa."

Rising, I hurried down to her room. I had not been there since they had buried her and it was with considerable trepidation that I stepped over that threshold. It was not her spectre I feared; I should have welcomed that. It was little things—such as the bed where she had died so quietly, like an exhausted child sinking into slumber, the dressing table, where she had so often sat, the mirror reflecting her lovely face back to me, as perched on the edge of her chaise longue, I talked to her of Jared and our plans for the future. Above all, I feared her scent, still clinging to the air of that deserted chamber. It was in my nostrils as I entered and the expected hurt was harder to bear than I had imagined, coupled as it was with my new knowledge. How serene she had been. At what cost had that serenity been achieved? What frantic thoughts had it concealed? How had she maintained it, she, a woman who had been as passionate and tempestuous as myself when a girl? I knew that from stories I had heard my father tell, and Mama herself had remarked that I took after her. "I see the child I used to be in you, Clarissa,"

she had often remarked. But could I ever be the woman she had become—gracious, calm, and serene—the turbulent stream changing into the quiet pool? How had she managed the transformation? I knew the answer to that, too. My father. Her love for him had turned her from child to woman, from tempestuous colt to gentle mare, and how she must have loved him, never to have let an angry word cross her lips, never to have let us know by look or gesture her fears, her terrors for our future. For knowing Mama, I was sure she had experienced them, yet she had died without revealing them.

Steeling myself, I went swiftly to her dressing table and, pressing the little ornamental knob that appeared to be a drawer-pull but was not, I released the secret drawer that held her jewel case. Of course, its contents or the lack of them was no surprise to me, coming from that empty attic. I had been positive that her cameo set would be missing and with it, her sapphire ring, her garnet set, and the pearls her father had fastened about her neck on her wedding day. It was in the bottom of the case that I found the small box and the envelope with my name written across it in my mother's flowing script.

I took it out slowly—the unexpected sight of Mama's handwriting gave me a strange sensation. She had been in the habit of leaving little notes for me when she went away, even if it were merely a visit to a neighbor, but I had not expect-

ed to see one again and there it was, giving me the feeling that she was not long gone and that she might step back into her room at any moment. Almost expectantly, I looked over my shoulder, but the threshold was empty; I saw only the rug and the railing that squared off the stairs. Not even my active imagination could place her in the stairwell. I would never see her again—I had to recognize that fact, instill it into my consciousness, but I could not restrain my tears, especially when I noticed how shaky her handwriting was. She had written it during her illness—but how could that have been possible? She had been in a coma after my father's passing. Had she penned it earlier, then?

The envelope in my hand was heavier than I had expected. When I opened it, a little locket fell out. It was gold set with a minute spray of diamonds and opened, it revealed two smiling young faces—a girl who resembled Betsey and a man whose likeness stared back at me from my mirror, save that my chin was more pointed and my eyes a topaz brown instead of deeply blue under my thick black lashes, but my hair was as black as his and my skin as fair. Of course, I was looking at my parents in their youth. I had seen these pictures before in the family album, but these were delicately painted on ivory. Caught as I was by the charm of the work and by my emotion at seeing my parents so young and beautiful, I still closed the locket—I wanted to read what my mother had writ-

ten. I unfolded the paper. Rather than one of her hasty notes, she had covered a page with her small writing—alas, how very shaky and blotted it was!

“My dearest Clarissa,” she had begun, “when you read this, I shall have followed your dear father to heaven . . .”

I could not restrain a sob. She had known, then, that he had died—had she willed herself to follow him? No, the next sentence abolished that supposition.

I am very weak and I know that this illness will take me as it did my darling, and though I hate to leave my beloved children, I am content to follow my husband. Only, I do wish I could have left you a greater legacy. Mr. Colwell will have told you of our ruin—my jewels were all sold, as was the furniture, long ago. Perhaps you will think it wrong of me to have withheld the truth from you—indeed, I should have let you have some inkling of our grave situation, but I could not bear to burden you with it. Also, we had hope that your father would be able to recoup his losses—alas, it was not to be. Your Papa had the soul of a poet or a philosopher and he trusted people—too much, I fear, but I would not change him—his strengths were greater than his weaknesses. Oh, my dearest Clarissa, I should be with you now but since I am not, trust in the good Lord, my dear

child, and pray for guidance. Somehow, I am not as frightened for you as I could be. You are capable and lovely—a fine wife for Jared Colwell, for any man, my own, and I ask you to think well before you marry. Be sure of your love and his, Clarissa.

I am growing weaker and I shall not be able to write much longer, so let me say to you—take care of your sister, who is less able to fend for herself. Try and impart to her some of your own strength, rule her with a firm yet loving hand, and make an effort to curb the waywardness in her disposition. She must not be allowed to have her own way at all times or else she will be sadly unfit for life, which is never so permissive.

The locket is all I may bequeath to you. In the green leather box, you will find the turquoise ring Betsey has always admired. Give it to her with my love. My own darling, farewell, farewell, farewell—may God keep you and bless you...

Your loving mother.

Her tears had blotted the ink and mine caused new blots. "Oh, Mama..." I sobbed. "I feel so lost and so alone—if you could only help me." As I spoke, I saw her, but only in my mind's eye. I shivered—the room was so empty, and though it was still filled with her belongings, her workbasket, a half-finished piece of embroidery, her

silver-backed brushes, her bottle of violet scent—all these were beginning to have that impersonal quality that one finds in a museum case. I could not bear to stay there any longer. Taking up the letter, the locket, and the box containing Betsey's ring, I fled.

As I came downstairs, the full impact of my discoveries hit me. Many of the really good pieces of furniture had been sold and with them had gone my mother's jewelry. Was there anything of value left to us—the crystal, the china, they were costly. Then there were some Meissen figurines—or were there? It occurred to me that I had not noticed them lately. I should have to look, really look, but at present, I could not face any more disappointments. Sitting down on the stairs, I pondered my mother's words. She had expressed faith in my ability to maintain my sister and myself, but how? There were so few things a woman could do to earn money—teaching or domestic service was all that was open to us. If only Jared had been with me. I thought of my mother's strictures, and taking out the letter, I reread the line concerning Jared. It was disturbing; she had adjured me to be sure of my love and his, but she knew he loved me, knew, too, I loved him—had loved him all the years of my youth! Again, the disquieting fact of his silence crossed my mind; in view of my mother's letter, it seemed to take on a new meaning. Could he have found someone else?

"No!" I exclaimed out loud. My mother had

been ill, even feverish when she had written those words—fever could distort the mind, fill it with strange fears. If Mama had been herself, she could never have expressed such doubts. If . . .

The doorbell rang—its peal, harsh and singularly abrasive in the silence of the hall, startled me, and, for some reason, filled me with apprehension. I was reluctant to open the door, but it would be foolish to wait for Lizzie or Janet with me only steps away.

Before I could reach it, the bell had sounded a second time and as I pulled it open, the knocker clanged against its plate. On the threshold before me stood a small, plump woman, whose hand seemed raised against me—actually, she had just dropped the knocker. She looked at me with a mixture of impatience and embarrassment. As for me, my initial fears faded as amusement took their place—I had never seen anyone so lavishly or so badly dressed. She wore a sealskin coat over a silk gown that was a particularly virulent shade of green and, from what I could see of it, heavily trimmed with passementerie. But it was her bustle that really caught the eye—huge and exaggerated, its effect was ludicrous. She looked like the figurehead of a ship, especially since her hair, dyed a vivid orange, was arranged in stiff ringlets on either side of her pudgy face and topped by an equally stiff hat decorated with upstanding cockfeathers. She peered at me from small, shrewd blue eyes which, I discovered, were con-

stantly blinking—a nervous tic that rendered her presence even more disconcerting. Quelling the laughter threatening to escape me, I said, “May I help you?”

She nodded, “Yes, Miss Lovell . . .” she paused. “You are, I presume, Miss Lovell?”

“I am,” I acknowledged. “And you are . . .”

“I’m Mrs. Frederick Long. Believe me, Miss Lovell, I am truly sorry for your loss and I have not wanted to intrude, but since I have arrangements of my own to make, I must know when you plan to leave the house.”

“Leave . . . the house?” I repeated stupidly.

She nodded a second time, “Originally, we had expected to move in by the middle of October but—of course—under the circumstances, we’ve been willing to wait. However . . .”

“You . . . you’d expected to . . . to move in . . . here?” I demanded incredulously.

She took a step backward, her blinking gaze fixed on my face. “Your father did not tell you, then?”

“Tell me . . . what?”

She gave me a nervous but, on the whole, conciliating smile. “Might I come in, my dear?” she asked.

“Please do.”

As she stepped into the hall, she cast a quick look around her. “I see he did not,” she sighed. “Well, then, it’s up to me.” Somewhat to my surprise, she preceded me into the parlor, and with a

disturbingly proprietary air, she indicated a chair—almost as though I were the visitor and she the lady of the house. Once we were seated, she said briskly, “I am sure this will come as a shock to you, but there’s no help for it. A month ago, my husband and I bought Oakhurst from your father. As I told you, we’d expected to be settled by the middle of October, but we’d agreed that we’d wait until the end of the month. Now, it seems as though it must be even later than that—which makes it very difficult. Do you suppose, you might arrange to go before Thanksgiving—say, by the third week in November?”

“The third week in November . . .” I repeated, but the words really meant nothing to me. It was too much . . . too much for me to take in all at once—this strange little woman with her dyed hair and her fancy clothes was the owner of Oakhurst? It was not possible. My father could not have sold our home to such a person. I became aware that she was speaking to me.

“... lovely large rooms . . .” she was saying. “I should like to see all of it . . . but if it’s not convenient for you to take me through at this time, I can wait.” She looked at me hopefully.

“I . . . I am sorry,” I mumbled, “but it’s not convenient, Mrs. Long. You see—my sister’s ill upstairs and—”

“Oh, is she?” Mrs. Long broke in. “I hope it’s nothing bad.”

“She’s better, but I’d rather not worry her

about any . . . changes at present. It's been a very difficult time for her . . ."

"For both of you, I'm sure," Mrs. Long said hastily. The nervous tic was more apparent than ever as she added, "I do wish we'd not invited people for Thanksgiving, but perhaps—"

"Please," I interrupted, "we'll be gone by the third week in November—by the second, if you choose."

She flushed. "There's no need for you to . . ."

"But there is!" I cried. "Oakhurst belongs to you now and you should be able to live in it. It . . . it's such a very pleasant house. We were very happy here and I'm sure you . . . you will be, too. I—" To my embarrassment, I could not say another word—I could not speak over the lump in my throat.

The odd little woman hurried to my side. "Oh, my dear, I should have known better," she moaned. "I did not mean . . ."

"Miss Clarissa, is there anything amiss?" Janet had come to the entrance of the parlor and was regarding Mrs. Long with considerable suspicion.

"No . . ." I said weakly.

"Sal volatile!" Mrs. Long exclaimed. "She should have sal volatile and a cup of hot tea." Moving to the door, she opened it quickly. "My dear," she said apologetically, "I wish it hadn't been me that told you and you mustn't think about it any more today. Have some hot tea." The door slammed behind her.

"Who was that—that person, Miss Clarissa?" Janet demanded.

I looked at her outraged countenance and, suddenly, it was all very very funny. I actually giggled as I answered. "That, Janet, was the new owner of Oakhurst."

"The . . . new owner . . ." Janet repeated. "I don't believe it!"

I continued to giggle. "It's true. It's absolutely true, Janet. Papa sold it to her—to her and her husband—last month. He'd have told us but, you see, he couldn't because . . . because he . . . he . . . he died." I tried, but I could not swallow my insane giggles—instead they grew louder, turning into uncontrollable laughter, and then, suddenly, amazingly, Janet struck me across the face. My laughter ceased as abruptly as it had started. "You . . . you . . ." I glared at her.

"Oh, miss," Janet was on her knees beside my chair, holding my hands tightly. "I'm sorry but I had to do that. You were having hysterics, Miss Clarissa, love. I hope I didn't hurt you."

I rubbed my stinging cheek. "No, you didn't hurt me, Janet, dear," I said gratefully. "You did me a great kindness. Thank you." I stood up.

"Miss Clarissa, you'd better go lie down and I'll bring you some hot tea. I don't know as you need sal volatile—but hot tea . . ."

"No," I told her resolutely. "I do not want tea. I must go into town. Have Morgan harness the horses, please."

Janet's gray eyes were full of concern. "Miss Clarissa, hadn't you better wait——"

"No," I interrupted. "Please do as I ask, Janet."

She sighed, "Very good, miss."

In something under an hour, I was once more seated in Caleb Colwell's office. I had dressed hastily, but I looked presentable, I thought, in another of my new black gowns. I had washed my face and braided my hair, and a glimpse in my mirror showed me a calm exterior and untroubled eyes. I needed to be calm when I talked to him. I needed to have complete control of my emotions when I discussed my circumstances. Yet, now, as I sat facing him, I did not quite know where to begin. Then, it occurred to me that, as my father's lawyer, he must know that Oakhurst had been sold. I wondered why he had not told me, but it would not do to accuse him of negligence. I said, "Mrs. Long came to see me this morning, Mr. Colwell."

"Miss Long," he repeated. He was, I realized, looking very somber and his gaze was rather abstracted.

"Mrs. Long," I corrected. "Mrs. Frederick Long. Surely, you know——"

"Mrs. Frederick Long!" he interrupted. "Yes." He paused, studying my face, "And of course, that is why you are here?"

I found the question surprising, "Yes," I said.

"I was hoping you might advise me. You see . . . she wants . . . but perhaps you already know that she would like to take possession of . . . of Oakhurst in the early part of November. She . . . said she'd wait until the third week, which is really most magnanimous of her, since she wanted to be in the house by mid-October." I had spoken very quickly, the words fairly flew from my lips. If I had hesitated in the slightest, I might have stopped completely, might even have wept. I felt like weeping but I forced myself to smile instead, even when I asked, "What shall we do?" Before he could answer, I added, "I don't imagine there's anything we can do, is there? Is there time to hold an auction? Mama, I find, has sold some of our furniture, but there are a few——"

"Miss Lovell!" he interrupted. "I'm sorry. She shouldn't have come to you . . . this Mrs. Long."

"But she did," I said. "I am glad she did. I am glad to know how matters stand. You should have—" I broke off hastily, I did not want to make any accusations, I reminded myself.

"I should have told you. I wanted to tell you, Miss Lovell, and I should have done so by the end of the week. I did not expect Mrs. Long to be quite so precipitate."

"I do not really consider her precipitate, Mr. Colwell. After all, if the sale was consummated a month ago, she has every right to be impatient."

"She has no right!" he rasped. "Please do not defend her. She and her husband do not need you

to champion them. It was through their machinations that your father was ruined. If he'd been alive to testify . . ." He shook his head. "But it's too late." He sighed. "It's all too late."

"You're saying Papa was cheated?" I demanded.

"Yes, Miss Lovell, and to my thinking the transaction over Oakhurst was fraudulent, but there's no way of proving it."

"Fraudulent? I am glad of that," I breathed.

His eyebrows rose, "Glad?" he echoed incredulously. "You are glad?"

"Glad," I said firmly, "for I could not see how Papa could have sold our home to such a person."

His lips twitched into a brief smile. "You have a unique way of looking at things, Miss Lovell. You are also uncommonly brave. Most women would have treated me to a strong case of hysterics."

I know that I flushed, remembering my own recent bout of them. I said, "I'll not deny I was upset about it, Mr. Colwell, but emotional outbursts will not solve the problems facing me—the problems of finding a position and caring for my sister. Do you think that the money raised from a sale of the furniture would be enough to send Betsey to a warm climate?"

He shook his head. "Any monies resulting from such a sale would be claimed by your creditors, I fear. However, you need not worry about your sister. I'll see to her well-being and to your own, too."

I felt as though he had struck me. Rising, I cried, "I've not come to you for charity. I am capable of caring for my sister and myself, I . . ." But even as I spoke, I realized that I was not capable of doing any such thing—any position I might find would pay very little, certainly not enough to send Betsey off to recuperate. I sat down. "I beg your pardon, Mr. Colwell," I said brusquely. "I was not thinking clearly. If . . . if you might help Betsey, I would be eternally grateful and when I find a position, I shall return the money to you, a little each week."

Again, he smiled, but I noticed his eyes remained somber. "This position you keep mentioning. Where do you expect to find it?"

"In a school, possibly the one I attended—then, there are country schools, too. Teaching jobs are not hard to find, I believe, and I have had a respectable education."

"Two weeks ago, a young woman teaching in a country school right here in Massachusetts—Canton, I believe—was stoned to death by her pupils, Miss Lovell. Four youths who might better have been serving in the army or the navy—they were of that age and beyond. Teaching is no occupation for a gently bred female."

"I could be a governess or—a—a companion," I said. "I might even go into domestic service."

He was silent a moment, then he said softly, "Is this future you envision for yourself so much

more alluring to you than accepting aid from me?"

"There . . . there's no reason why you should aid me, Mr. Colwell."

"On the contrary, Miss Lovell, there is every reason. Do you think me unaware of your attachment to my son?"

I felt my face grow warm. "If—I am attached to your son, Mr. Colwell, still that is not your responsibility. Indeed . . ." I stopped. I could hardly tell him that Jared was one more reason why I could not accept his help.

"Indeed, since you've aligned yourself on the side of my son and regard me as your enemy . . . is that what you were about to tell me, Miss Lovell?"

He had summed up the situation so accurately that it left me without defenses and practically without words. "I . . . no . . . of . . . of course not," I stuttered.

He sighed, "I fear you have a penchant for championing the wrong people, my dear."

"The wrong people!" I glared at him. "Jared?"

"Jared," he said, looking at me with an odd expression—it seemed composed of equal parts of anger and pity.

"You," I told him coldly, "do not understand Jared. You never have. Just because he bears some resemblance to his mother, you resent him and —"

"Miss Lovell!" he interrupted, "did my son give you this masterly summation of my motives?"

"No, but I have eyes and ears . . ."

"Which you put to very little use if you believe I would react in such a manner. If I have any cavil with my son, it is not over his features, my dear, it goes deeper than that."

"You cannot criticize his character!" I cried hotly.

"Can I not?" he rasped. "Can I not—when he has just proven he—" He broke off, staring at me. "How long is it since you've heard from Jared?" he inquired.

For some reason his question filled me with fear, but I said, "The mails from Italy are always uncertain."

"You've not answered my question."

"A little over six months," I told him reluctantly, "but the weather—"

"I had a letter from Jared yesterday," he interrupted. "I found it when I got home." He cleared his throat, and at the look in his eyes, my fear increased.

"He . . . he's not ill?" I faltered.

"No, Miss Lovell, he's not ill. My son is easily influenced. Nor does he know the value of money . . . in that he's much like his mother . . . he also shares her love of luxury . . ."

I thought I knew what he meant. I said, "You mean—because I am poor, Jared would not want me?"

"No, I do not mean that!" he said sharply. "I've no way of knowing what his reaction would have

been. If he'd been here . . . I prefer to believe it would not have been so mercenary. I think if he had known, he would have stood by you. But he did not know and he had his own financial troubles."

"Oh," I sighed, "his money must have run out more quickly than he expected."

"It did," Mr. Colwell replied grimly. "To some extent, I have been helping him, but——"

"You!" I could not help interjecting.

"Did you think I would let my son starve in a foreign country, Miss Lovell?" Again there was a mixture of expressions on his face, and one of them was hurt.

"I . . ."

"No matter, let me tell you." He paused. "Believe me, my dear, you might consider me your enemy, but I am not and I wish with all my heart that it had not been my task to"—he sighed—"but I may not alter the sense of what I must say by procrastination. Jared's letter contains the intelligence that he was married a fortnight since to the Contessa Lucia di Sant'angelo."

"Married?" I said incredulously. "Married . . . Jared . . . married?"

He rose hastily, hurrying toward me. "Miss Lovell . . ."

I was conscious of weakness, dizziness, and ultimately darkness, as for the second time in two days, I fainted in Caleb Colwell's office.

I awakened almost instantly to find him again

proffering me a glass of brandy. "No," I whispered, pushing it away. I felt miserably unwell, but my mental distress was greater than my physical symptoms. I said weakly, childishly, "It cannot be true."

"It's true enough," he replied. "The ceremony took place in the United States Consulate. The Contessa is an American woman, the widow of an Italian nobleman. She was born Lucy Armstrong and she's an heiress. That is all the information my son included in his letter. They will make their home in Rome."

Each fact that he presented to me was a nail hammered into my heart. I had not been able to believe it at first, but with his words, he had established the reality of Lucy Armstrong di Sant'angelo Colwell and with it the reality of Jared's marriage. I felt . . . I did not feel anything. You had to be alive to feel and I was no longer alive. I had not fainted. I had died—the me that had been Clarissa Lovell.

A silence fell in the office. I felt I should say something, but I could not speak. I felt strangely detached, as if I had suddenly receded and was standing a great distance apart—yet at the same time, I was aware of everything in a new way: the huge desk where Mr. Colwell sat, his heavy oak cabinets in the corner, the windows facing the dusty street. Several carriages were passing; I gazed at them incuriously—they had no reality for me. That was it; nothing I looked at held any re-

ality for me at all—I might have been a ghost from another time, come back to haunt a familiar yet unfamiliar world. I had a moment of panic—how was I to live the rest of my life in this world that had lost its meaning for me?

“I don’t know what I am going to do,” I said and was startled because I had spoken aloud.

“You’ll do very well,” Mr. Colwell rasped. “You may not believe it now, but you had a fortunate escape. My son does not deserve you, nor would you have been happy with him. Jared has always had a lack of responsibility. You’d have discovered this failing sooner or later. It’s well it happened before you were married—before there was a child to abandon.”

“A child to abandon.” Those words stuck in my mind. They seemed to have a special meaning for me. A split second later, I knew why. There was still the problem of Betsey to consider. I was no longer worried about myself—I did not care what happened to me. But Betsey—I had promised someone I should look after her. I had promised God. I said, “It’s Betsey I must consider now.”

He gave me a long look. “I have told you you need not worry about your sister—or yourself, my dear.”

He gazed at me earnestly. “I want to help you, Miss Lovell. And to whom else can you turn? You must not allow your feelings toward Jared to prevent your acceptance of my assistance.”

“It’s not . . .” I stopped, because deep down in-

side of me, I realized that he spoke the truth. If Jared had not gone to Italy . . . if he had not been *forced* to go to Italy . . . I had thought I was dead, but there was a part of me that had not yet succumbed, obviously, and out of that part, I could not forbear crying, "You made him go away . . . he was not suited for law. Why did you insist he enter your firm?"

His eye narrowed. "Is that what he told you?" He shook his head. "I never insisted, Miss Lovell. Though it was a source of regret to me that I did not have a son who could work with me as I had worked with my father, I knew Jared would never be a lawyer. He wasn't forced to go to Italy—I told him he could study architecture in this country, but if he wanted to go to Italy, he could use the money he inherited from his maternal grandmother—I would finance his studies here, but not there."

"But he told me . . ." I began.

"Jared has a strong sense of the dramatic—a trait of his mother's. He, too, likes to justify his actions. I see that I have been represented as that stock theatrical character the "unfeeling father." Is that not true, Miss Lovell?"

"He . . . he . . ." I paused. I had wanted to defend Jared, but he did not need my defenses. He had a wife . . . a wife . . . a wife, and there was no longer any reason for me to deny what was the truth. Reluctantly, I nodded. "Yes, that's right."

"And did he call me 'cruel?'" pursued Mr.

Colwell. As I nodded, he sighed. "I should have known by your attitude. That's why you've always been so frightened of me."

"I've not been frightened," I returned.

"Antagonistic, then. It was Jared's work. He's always resented me—more after his mother left us."

Looking into his grave countenance, I was suddenly sorry for him. "Perhaps," I ventured, "he did not understand."

"Did not want to understand would be more accurate. From my observations, I've learned it's easier to believe the worst if—" He broke off, shaking his head. "But what are we about, Miss Lovell? The motivations of my son are not of paramount importance at this moment. We must talk of your future."

"My sister . . ." I began.

Again, he shook his head. "Your own future, then, has ceased to matter to you? Is that what you imply? You consider that your life is over?" He stared at me. "However, you are young and healthy, and though you might will yourself into a decline, I wouldn't expect you'd do so, not when you began to think more clearly. That, of course, might take some time, and meanwhile there are the problems of your house, your father's creditors, and your sister, which I intend to handle for you.

"As for your future, I want to make you the following proposition . . ." He paused, suddenly

looking much less sure of himself and much younger. Again, the resemblance to Jared was so marked I wanted to close my eyes. He said, "My dear, I would like to offer you the protection of my name and my home."

I could hardly believe I heard him aright. "What are y-you asking of me," I stuttered.

"I am asking you to be my wife, Miss Lovell," he answered solemnly.

"You . . . but . . . why . . ."

"My dear," he said softly, "there's no reason for you to be frightened—though of course, in your present state of mine, I can well understand such a proposal must be shocking, especially as you've been led to believe me both arbitrary and cruel." He paused, and when he spoke again, it was jerkily. "I believe I am neither . . . though of course, I am apt to be prejudiced. However, let me tell you, my dear, I have the highest regard for you. It's not something of the moment. In the last two or three years, I've found myself hoping I would see more of you. I was always sorry you did not come to the house more often. One of the reasons I discouraged Jared about Italy was that I hoped he'd marry you and bring you to live at Colwell's Crossing. I did not ask myself why I wanted this so much or why I was so disappointed when he went to Italy, but I know now—it was because I was deprived of your presence. I have missed seeing you, my dear." He took a deep breath, "I know you've learned to dislike and distrust me,

but if, in some little measure, you could change your feelings, it would give me the greatest possible happiness. I don't ask you to love me . . . I only want to care for you."

How may I describe how I felt at that moment? No one, no one in the whole world could take the place of Jared. I had offered him all the love I possessed. I could not take it back and I had none left to give. Yet, Mr. Colwell had assured me he did not expect my love. Did he really mean it—and if he did, how might I marry a man who was only a few years younger than my father; but, again, that did not matter. I should not want to marry a young man, either. He was looking at me so kindly. I had never thought of him as kind, yet he must be both kind and good. I would be safe with him—of that I was sure. Still, marriage meant new responsibilities. I had only a vague idea of what was expected of a married woman. Mama had never been very specific about it, but she had hinted at many changes in one's existence. At school, there had been some giggling discussions concerning the intimacies of the bedchamber—what these were, none of us had been entirely sure. I shrank away from considering them now. I said, "I . . . I don't know—"

"Child," he interrupted quickly, "child, I don't ask that you give me an answer now. I want you to think about it. Think about it as long as you choose and if you should not be able to accept my proposal, do not worry about it. I shall under-

stand and it will not lessen my high regard for you."

"You . . . are very kind," I said. "I . . . would like to . . . think about it."

He nodded and rose. "May I drive you home?" he inquired.

"My carriage is below," I told him.

"Very good, I'll see you to it," he said.

I was in an odd mood when I returned home. After ascertaining that Betsey was sleeping under Janet's supervision, I went to my room. Once inside of it, I looked around me at the familiar four-poster with its dimity hangings, at the high-boy with its little round mirror. I stared into the mirror—it seemed to me that I should look much different, eons older. Certainly, I felt older, but my face was unchanged.

"Oh," I moaned, "if only I were very old. If only my life were over. It ought to be over." The tears came, then. "How shall I live without Jared?" I cried, but the mirror was not a crystal ball, such as fortune tellers were supposed to use, it was only a looking glass and held no answers for me. I turned away from it. A fire was burning on my hearth, and if I closed my eyes, I could see Mama sitting on one of the chairs near it. She had been wont to come into my room at bedtime to discuss the affairs of the day with me.

I sank down near her chair, "Mama, what shall I do?" I breathed.

"You must do as you think best, darling."

It was one of her favorite answers—she did not believe in making any decisions for me. "It is you who will have to live with the results and I should not want you blaming me if they were not all you expected."

"But I don't know what to do," I told her. I stared into the flames and, as always, I saw pictures in them—faces; more specifically, Jared's face, grown mocking and sinister as any devil's.

"He is a devil!" I cried. "I should hate him. I wish I could." But I could not. I could only love him and wish him here to comfort me—to comfort me because he had married an unknown woman in a far country and now we should never live together as man and wife.

"But I don't want to marry anyone else," I told that fire-face. "I shall be an old maid and live here at Oakhurst for ever and ever." But I couldn't do that either. Oakhurst was no longer mine. I had no home. I had nothing.

There was a knock at my door.

"Yes?" I said, swallowing my sobs.

Janet opened the door a crack, "Miss Clarissa, Miss Betsey's awake and calling for you."

I hurried to my sister's room and found her weeping into her pillow. I rushed to her side, "Love, what ails you? You're not ill again?"

She raised her streaming eyes to mine, "N-No, Rissa, but—but I m-miss Mama and Papa both so much. I . . . I wish we . . . we were a family again."

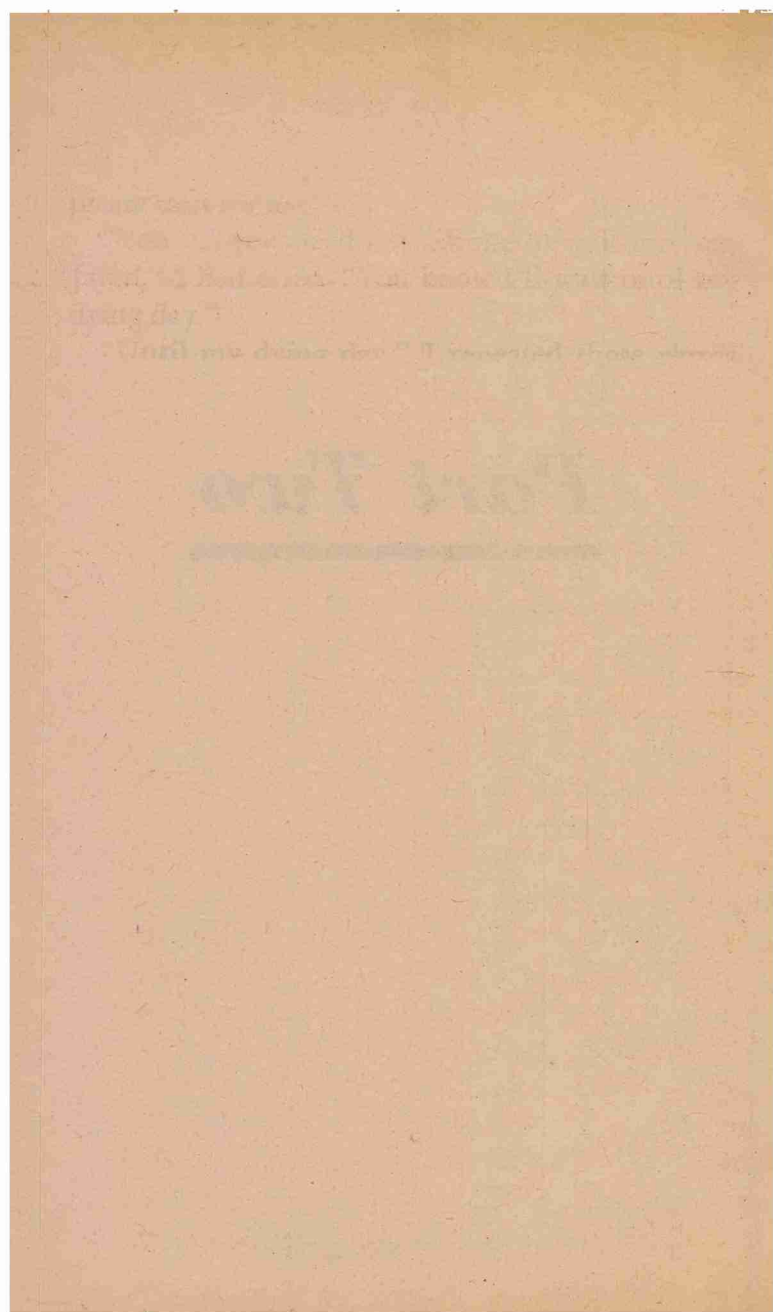
Looking at her, I had the answer I had been seeking. "We shall be a family again, my love," I told her. "I shall see to it."

"Will you, Clarissa?" she said eagerly. "Is that a promise?"

"Yes, my own dearest," I said softly, "it's a promise."

Within the hour, I wrote to Mr. Colwell and told him I should be his wife.

Part Two



The wind was moving through the trees like a beast of prey and the sky seen through the silhouette of the bare branches was an iridescent blue filled with immense pale gray clouds edged with sunlight. I saw the profile of an angel in one, but even as I looked, it turned into a leopard's maw, open and snarling. At that moment, the carriage bearing my husband, my sister, and myself home from the railroad station rounded a bend in the driveway and I saw the leopard cloud poised directly over the chimneys of Colwell's Crossing.

Betsey, whose health and spirits had much improved during the month we had spent in Barbados, had been chattering gaily and nearly incessantly on the way from the station, but she now became silent and nervous, casting side glances through the carriage window at the house and moving closer to Caleb, whom she treated almost as a father. He put his arm around her and she snuggled still closer to him. His smile was reassuring. "The witch is a long time dead, my dear."

Caleb's words startled me, and at the same

time, I was annoyed with Betsey, who must have mentioned her fears concerning the witch whose fatal crossing had given his house its name. Though I prided myself on my lack of superstition, I did not like to think of that hunted creature's final agonies. Not on the day my husband brought me to his home. I said sharply, "Betsey knows better than to believe in witches."

She looked at me out of frightened eyes. "But I do believe in her," she whispered. "She lived. Everybody knows that—and everybody knows she cursed the ground on which this house was built."

"Oh, my dear," I protested, "it's nothing but an old wives' tale."

"Yet frightening to children," Caleb said, rubbing his chin against my sister's golden hair.

The carriage halted under the porte cochere before I could answer, which was probably just as well, for I might have said Betsey was becoming too old to be considered a child and that he was spoiling her, sentiments that might have further alienated my sister, the while they might have angered my husband. It was ironic that I, having married so that Betsey could have the home she craved, had lost her affection by that same act—or so it seemed, for having been informed of my intentions, she had cried stormily, begging me not to leave her. Indeed, on my wedding day, she had been actually ill with weeping, and it was with the greatest difficulty that I had persuaded her to attend the brief ceremony held in the chambers

of Judge Malcolm Cheney, an old friend of Caleb's. I had worn mourning—so odd for a bride, yet, in my state of mind it had been appropriate. Even though I could no longer consider Caleb Colwell an enemy, I was as much in mourning for my lost love as for my parents, whose passing demanded my sable attire. Yet, once I had come to stand beside Caleb Colwell, I had had the odd feeling that it was his son I was marrying. They did resemble each other so much and Caleb had looked very boyish that day—boyish, uncertain, and excited. The hand that had held mine so tightly had been moist and had trembled when he pressed the heavy gold circlet onto my third finger, left hand. I had been more aware of his reactions than of my own. I still did not remember murmuring the responses, and when Judge Cheney had said, "I now pronounce you man and wife," I had been surprised, because it had happened so quickly, very quickly, when one considered that a marriage lasted a lifetime. A lifetime? That, too, could be any time at all—I had heard of brides dying at the altar or a month later or a year or—sixty years. Sixty years! I could not live that long, rather I could not pretend to be alive for that long a time—because I was not really alive any more. The Clarissa Colwell who sat beside her husband in the carriage was a totally different person from the Clarisa Lovell who had loved Jared Colwell.

This Clarissa was cool rather than passionate—

the new intimacies of marriage had surprised her, but they had awakened no real response in her. She neither welcomed nor loathed them, they were merely part of a life she accepted and endured, her enthusiasm for living gone—quite, quite gone. She looked at her sister with wonder; Betsey had moods, she was happy one moment, sad the next. Clarissa Colwell had no moods—nothing meant anything any more. Yet, because of the man at her side, she smiled when the occasion warranted a smile, laughed when it was necessary to laugh, and pretended the responses she could not feel—after all, she owed him that much. She would make a valiant effort to be the wife he wanted—he had told her he wanted to receive again, that he needed a hostess. “I’ve lived too long a hermit,” he had said, “but now I have a reason for leaving my cave.” He had looked at her so proudly that she had wished she might love him, but, true to his promise, he had not mentioned that dangerous word. He was content simply to have her with him, and he was very proud of her. “You’re so beautiful, Clarissa,” he had said more than once. “I’ll be glad when you can wear colors again—I shall order the finest fabrics from Paris, red and golds and browns. We’ll commission the very best dressmaker in New York to make them for you. As for ballgowns, I see you in white—all in white and waltzing with me.”

“In white and waltzing with . . .” she had echoed in her mind and she had not mentioned

the name—she never mentioned that name if she could help it. It was Betsey who demanded news of her old friend Jared—but there had been no news, not since the letter announcing his wedding, the letter to his father. In Clarissa's new world Jared did not exist. In Clarissa's new world there would be other Colwell children, those she bore her husband.

"I will be a good mother to them," I vowed. "But please, God, do not make me live too long. Not sixty years."

"Clarissal" Caleb said, just a little impatiently.

"She doesn't hear you." Betsey giggled.

"Yes, Caleb?" I answered.

"Jacob's waiting to hand you down from the carriage."

Startled, I turned to find Jacob Rice, a tall old man who had worked for the Colwells since Jared and I were children, standing below. He had reached out his hand. I took it with a murmured, "Jacob, how good to see you again."

He did not return my smile. His face, thin, high-cheekboned, pale yellow in hue, looked almost skeletal—an effect heightened by skin so thin it seemed stretched across his bones, robbing him of all expression. However, I knew him to be far from impassive. He could laugh. Jared had often made him laugh; he could be stern, but his sternness had always been mitigated by a stray gleam in his eye, for he had been fond of Jared, and of me, as an extension of Jared. On

scanning his face, now, I found no trace of a gleam in his pale eyes—only a chill, wintry stare that excluded me. It was as though he had condemned me for my broken allegiance to the boy he had adored. I wanted to cry. "But it was not my fault, Jacob," but of course, it would have been useless. I moved away from him quickly and he turned to Betsey. Probably because she looked frail, he lifted her down. I saw him look at her hair and wondered if its golden hue reminded him of Jared's? Jared, Jared, Jared!!!! Why did he inhabit my thoughts? Why did he stand at my side? Why did he dwell in my heart like an incubus? I had thought myself free of him—I had thought myself dead, but it was not true. I was alive—terribly alive, and I wanted him—not the man with me, not the man whom I now called husband! I was relieved when Jacob, without another word, without even an acknowledgment of Caleb's greeting, stalked away, disappearing among the trees at the back of the house.

I was warmly dressed—Caleb had bought me a lovely sealskin coat and the gown beneath was of heavy wool, but as I came across the wide porch of Colwell's Crossing, I felt chilled. Still I did not want to walk into the house that loomed over me. Caught in its shadow, I shivered, feeling colder than the snow that whitened its grounds. Even though, as a child, I had spent hours in it, its monumental ugliness intimidated me, and though I had scoffed at Betsey's superstitious fears, I found

I harbored a similar dread. It was with great reluctance that I followed my sister and my husband to the massive oaken door with its polished brass dragon knocker. Just as we reached it, the door swung open and standing in the aperture was the other villain of my childhood—Mrs. Ursula Curtis, the housekeeper, slim, elderly, elegant in the gray gown she always wore.

In my recollections of her, she had always been frowning; there were two deeply cut vertical lines over the bridge of her nose, but her mouth was twisted into a smile so false I preferred her habitual frown. Her eyes, hard and agate-gray, were expressionless as they rested on me. With the merest suggestion of a curtsy, she intoned, "Welcome home, madame. Welcome home, sir."

"Thank you, Mrs. Curtis," Caleb smiled. "My love," he turned to me, "custom declares I must carry you across the threshold."

Betsey clutched at his arm, "No, me!" she ordered imperiously.

He only laughed. "You are not my wife, child," he said, lifting me with an ease that was surprising considering my heavy coat, my gown, and my full complement of petticoats.

"Now me!" Betsey cried again, as he set me down in the hall.

"Very well." Caleb caught Betsey in his arms, but when he would have put her down beside me, she cried and clung to him.

"I miss them so much," she sobbed.

"Miss whom?" Caleb gently released her clinging arms and set her on her feet.

"Mama . . . Papa . . ." she whimpered. "They shouldn't have left me behind."

Her words chilled me. Had I bargained for a life she did not want? Caleb's laugh assuaged these fears. "You're too young to think of dying—when you've not lived."

"The child is tired after her long journey," Mrs. Curtis remarked.

There it was again—the word "child." But she was not a child—she was only three years my junior, and at sixteen, I had not considered myself a child and nor had Mama. There had been responsibilities delegated to me—at her age, I had been nearly capable of running the house. I had certainly never clung to Papa as Betsey chose to cling to Caleb. I had welcomed any chance to be independent of my parents because . . . but I did not want to think of that "because," I did not want to remember that at sixteen, I had been readying myself for marriage—to Jared.

"Leave me in peace!" I silently commanded that persistent phantom. Wasn't it better to be Betsey, still content to be a child, unburdened by foolish dreams of a mythical future? A million times better! With that thought in mind, I joined Caleb in comforting my poor little sister.

The interior of Colwell's Crossing had changed little since I had last seen it—some two months before Jared had gone to Italy. Yet, I seemed to

be viewing it for the first time. How bulky and ugly the furniture was—how outdated and outmoded, if such pieces could ever have been in style. From the hall, I had a view of the parlor—immense and gloomy, curtained against the sunlight. The air around me was heavy with a mixture of mustiness, dampness, and dust, suggesting a negligence on the part of Mrs. Curtis that increased my antipathy toward the woman.

Caleb, however, was cordial enough as he said, "The best part of any journey's the return. Isn't that true, Mrs. Curtis?"

"Yes, sir," she acknowledged with a cold little nod. "Your rooms are readied. I have given Miss Lovell the east chamber."

For a moment, I was furious, hearing her refer to me as "Miss" Lovell. Then, I realized she meant Betsey. Betsey was Miss Lovell and I had become Mrs. Colwell! Much of the same notion had crossed my sister's mind, for she said, "Miss Lovell. Fancy, Rissa, I am *Miss* Lovell." She clapped her hands, "Oh, I do feel grown up!"

Caleb smiled indulgently, "As long as you feel it and don't act it."

My sister pouted, but her gleaming eyes belied the sullenness of her expression, "I can be grown up when I choose," she responded. "I can be as sedate and as dull as Rissa, when I choose."

Her remark shocked me, but before I could retort, Caleb, his smile vanishing, said coldly,

"Your sister's neither sedate nor dull and you ought to appreciate her more."

Betsey hung her head. "Oh, I do," she said in a small voice. "I was only teasing." Darting to me, she asked plaintively, "You knew I was only teasing, Rissar?"

I did not know it. I did not feel that I knew Betsey at all any more, but I said calmly, "Of course, dear, I can always tell the difference." Turning to Caleb, I added, "Might we go to our rooms? I'm feeling tired and I'm sure the journey has wearied Betsey too. She's not recovered all her strength as yet."

Betsey whirled on me. "You're sending me to my room?" she demanded, her eyes bright with anger.

Caleb actually glared at her, "Nothing of the sort," he snapped. "We'd all be the better for a rest before dinner."

Betsey's expression remained sullen. Without another word, she started for the stairs, "Where's the east room?" she demanded.

"I'll show it to you, miss," Mrs. Curtis said.

Looking at her, I was startled. I had forgotten she was still there, and though it could not matter, I was sorry she had witnessed the altercation between Betsey and myself. Though I had no conscious reason for it, I felt she had derived some pleasure from the incident. A second later, I was sure I knew why. In common with Jacob Rice, she adored Jared, and even as I thought about it, I

knew too that she had never frowned at him—only at me, and that despite, or possibly because of my marriage, she disliked me still. That was a daunting thought and the one immediately following it was equally daunting; I wanted to dismiss her. I did not want to live in the same house with her.

An hour later, I lay in Caleb's immense four-poster bed. He had fallen asleep quickly, but I could not rest. I was still thinking about Mrs. Curtis. I had hoped that the room would yield some further evidence of her negligence, but there was none. If I could not like the heavy furniture or the drab wallpaper, I could not fault the neatness of the chamber; it was as immaculate as the bathroom that lay beyond it—the last, an innovation I applauded, since at Oakhurst, our accommodations had been almost primitive. It had been heartening to discover that Caleb's passion for personal cleanliness matched mine. There were other characteristics about him that pleased me. He was more even-tempered than I had imagined, certainly more so than Jared had led me to believe, and he had a manner which, without being condescending, won him respect from tradesmen, coachmen, and servants. He could also be a delightful companion, telling me stories about the places we had visited in Barbados, which suggested considerable reading. Under other circumstances, I might have enjoyed our sojourn on that sunny island considerably, but the fact that I had been on my honeymoon obtruded between me

and all pleasure. I welcomed only those hours I could spend alone, which in my new state were few. It had been more difficult for me than I had expected—sharing my life with a man I could not love; it had been equally difficult to deal with my sister's vagaries, especially when I considered that she had been the sole cause of my precipitous marriage. If it had not been for her precarious state of health, I might have . . . Mentally, I paused. What might I have done? What would have been the alternatives . . . in the face of Jared's marriage? I did not want to consider them. Thrusting Jared and his betrayal from my mind, I concentrated on the lesser of the evils—Betsey.

As far as her health had been concerned, she had thrived in the warmth of the island, gaining strength each day. She had also enjoyed the trips we had taken to the various points of historical interest and she had hung on every word Caleb addressed to her, but with me, she had been sulky and withdrawn. Occasionally, I had even surprised looks of pure fury directed at me, but, when challenged, she would never reveal the cause of her displeasure. Then, when I would be close to believing we could never again enjoy our old rapport, she would suddenly become the sunny adoring child I had known. Thinking on it now, it occurred that these moments only took place when we were alone—when we were with Caleb, it was to him she turned. Yet was that not understandable—she had always enjoyed greater

communication with Papa than with Mama, and her reaching toward my husband was only natural, especially since it was obvious he had a fatherly feeling for her. Thus, it was incumbent on me to be her mother as well as her sister. This conclusion was cheering to me—it occurred to me that I had not been very understanding of Betsey. In the past few weeks, her life had undergone changes which would be hard for a girl of sixteen to encompass had she been in the best of health, and poor Betsey had nearly died! I needed to be more patient with her. Yet, if I could be understanding with my sister, I did not see how I might be equally tolerant of Mrs. Curtis. A wave of depression washed over me. I sighed. What reason could I offer my husband concerning my feelings against a woman who had worked for him some twenty years? If I were to be rid of her, I would need a strong argument, strong enough to convince an excellent lawyer, and this I could not frame. To hope that Mrs. Curtis herself would provide fuel for that particular fire was to wish for an unpleasant confrontation, which I did not want either. I sighed a second time and found a comforting arm about my shoulders.

"Rest, Clarissa," my husband advised. "Too much thinking tires the brain." His hand, slipping from my shoulders to my waist, was caressing. I read desire in his eyes. Dutifully, I slipped down on the bed and held out my arms. It was, I realized, becoming easier to bear the inti-

macies that had originally frightened and shocked me—I had learned the trick of detachment.

Despite the fears that beset me on my arrival at Colwell's Crossing, the days following were markedly uneventful, at least in terms of any confrontations. In fact, some of my prejudice against Mrs. Curtis was alleviated when, to my joy, Janet arrived the morning after our return. "It was her doing, miss," she told me. "She looked me up special and said as how she thought you'd be the happier for me being with you."

"Oh, I am, I am," I cried joyfully. "Oh, Janet."

I had gone to thank Mrs. Curtis, but she had brusquely disclaimed responsibility. "It was Mr. Colwell who wanted it," she said, but Caleb, when asked, knew nothing about Janet. I did not pursue the subject any further; if Mrs. Curtis chose not to be thanked, I would oblige—but still, I felt better in my mind about her presence in the house.

Betsey and I also buried our differences in exploring. Though I had often been to Colwell's Crossing, I had had no idea as to the disposition of the rooms. Jared and I had remained mainly in the library on cold days and in the summer house at the end of the gardens when it was warmer. A morning of discovery left us with the surprising knowledge that there were no less than seven rooms on the first floor, seven more on the second, and a veritable rabbit warren of cubbyholes for

servants on the top floor under an immense attic. We also found that, aside from his library, a small dining room, and his bedroom, Caleb had used none of these, and for the most part, they had remained shuttered and closed, repositories only for dust and a collection of furniture that, Betsey and I both contended, did not deserve to be seen by light of day. I had been there less than a week when I decided I must transform Colwell's Crossing into the house it could and should be. I received no opposition from Caleb. When I told him of my plans, he smiled and said, "I'd hoped you'd suggest that. Eloise wanted to raze it to the ground"—a thread of passion ran through his voice—"but I couldn't do that. It's my home."

"Of course, you couldn't," I agreed warmly. Oakhurst was strong in my thoughts as I added, "A house becomes a part of you. She should have understood you."

His mirthless laugh grated on my ears. "She did not understand me. She did not try. She understood only the face her mirror revealed." He shrugged, "But that's neither here nor there, my dear. Do what you wish with Colwell's Crossing—spare no expense in making it the home you want."

He left me feeling both elated and depressed—elated because I now had a task to take my mind off myself—depressed because I wished I might love him as he deserved, but I couldn't. Jared had robbed me of that power.

The renovation of Colwell's Crossing took longer than I had anticipated. It was eighteen months before I could wake up in the morning without thoughts of carpenters, cabinetmakers, plasterers, painters whirling in my head. During that period, I concentrated on little else—Betsey, at Caleb's behest, had been sent to a very proper Boston finishing school; we saw her only on holidays, and at that time, it was Caleb who entertained her; he also visited her whenever he had business in Boston, escorting her to the opera, concerts, and stage plays, and buying her a number of lovely gowns. It was both a joy and a relief to me that she was so fond of Caleb, for as the months passed, the relations between my sister and me worsened. She treated me either with indifference or hostility, and there was none of the confidence we had shared in the old days. Absorbed as I was in the house, I stopped trying to discover the reasons behind her antipathy. I was merely thankful I did not need to deal with her moods. I wanted nothing to stand between me and my self-appointed task.

It was with a sense of real loss, rather than the accomplishment I should have experienced, that I awakened one morning in late August and let my mind travel from our light, bright bedroom into the newly paneled hall and down the polished stairs to the front hall with its Venetian glass chandelier catching the sunbeams that passed through the widened windows on either side of

the door. I veered into the parlor with its new suite of Belter furniture—here, I made a slight mental grimace, I was not fond of Belter's ornate designs, but Caleb loved them and it was in deference to him that I had ordered it. However, the muted Oriental carpet reflected in the wide mirror over the rosy marble mantelpiece did give me considerable pleasure, as did the golden damask draperies. Across the passageway lay the music room, its walls covered by an absolutely ravishing scenic paper depicting an ornamental garden, an effect that did not take away from the real gardens beyond its windows. Another chandelier descended from the high plastered ceiling and beneath it stood an Irish harp and a piano with a carved mahogany cabinet. Each room had its own treasures, but I had been sparing of these—my old hatred for clutter had prevailed and I could pride myself that the new interiors of Colwell's Crossing were both elegant and simple.

"A joy to the eye!" Caleb had called it. Yet, now, lying in bed, I could take no joy from my work; it had left me with nothing more to do except be another ornament in my husband's house, the hostess he had craved. My duties would begin that very evening and I did not look forward to that dinner party, nor did I happily contemplate the eventual teas, picnics, church suppers, dinners, occasional concerts, and balls that made up the social life of the town. I could see myself drifting through them, pretending, always pretending

an enjoyment I would not feel. Yet, if I stayed home, what would I do? Fancywork, perhaps? The idea appalled me. I had no talent for painting china, beading pincushions, embroidering pillows, or making lambrequins—this last, a craze which added ornamental borders fashioned from macramé, plush, velvet, linen, leather, damask, every possible material, even paper, on any bare ledge, made me laugh almost as much as the device of attaching skirts to piano legs. How Jared would have laughed at . . . Why did I have to think of him? Why did he still lurk in my thoughts? Why had all my efforts at Colwell's Crossing been to please not the father but the son? I shrank away from that certain knowledge—but at the back of the mind, it remained.

The guests we expected that August evening were all familiar to me, but they were mainly Caleb's friends and several of them had been entertained at my parents' home. I, myself, had formed few friendships beyond my close association with Jared and with my mother. Still, I could look forward to seeing at least one friend—Karen Russell. Her aunt was a community leader and Karen and I had known each other since we were six. When I was fifteen, her family had moved to Connecticut. At first, we had exchanged long, anguished letters but these had dwindled to shorter notes, and finally, we remembered each other only on birthdays and at Christmas. Still, when I found she was staying with her aunt, I was de-

lighted. It was through Karen's eyes that I realized how very much I had changed. She came early, the first of our guests to arrive and the most welcome. I can see our meeting as clearly now as if it had happened only hours ago.

I remember I had been feeling particularly pleased with my appearance that night. As he had promised, Caleb had bought me Parisian fabrics and from them, I had had numerous lovely gowns fashioned. The one I wore for the dinner was a deep rose silk gathered over an enormous bustle, an appendage I did not really need on that warm evening, but I was aware that it was the very latest fashion and I had been told it was very becoming. Also becoming were the rose-quartz and pearl eardrops, necklace, and bracelets I wore. Janet had dressed my hair; it was one of her better efforts, for she was not particularly gifted as a hairdresser. However, she had reached her apogee with my high pompadour. I had the impression it made me look exceptionally mature, at least thirty, which was what I wanted. Dignity was another effect for which I was striving that night, for if I could not love Caleb, at least I wanted to be a credit to him. Accordingly, I descended the stairs very slowly. It was rather difficult to move quickly with the bustle trailing behind me. I held my head high, wishing the pompadour did not make it feel so heavy, and kept my eyes on the chandelier.

"Rissa?!"

Startled, I looked down, and for the first time I saw Karen and was amazed at how much younger than I she looked—she wore a simple blue gown and her golden hair fell in ringlets around her pretty face. Forgetting my dignity, at least for the moment, I hurried the rest of the way and embraced her warmly. “Karen,” I smiled brightly, “it has been such a long time.” I stood back, continuing to smile but wondering at the distress in her eyes.

“You . . . you’ve changed so much,” she said uncertainly.

“Have I?” I replied. “Well, I am married now.”

“Even your voice,” she shook her head. “I should hardly have known you.

“It’s been seven years,” I reminded her. “You look the same, though. How am I different?”

“You . . . you’re so calm,” she said almost accusingly. “And you look at me as . . . as if I didn’t exist.”

“Darling Karen!” I was truly shocked. “When I am so glad to see you.”

Her distress remained. “Are you?” she questioned tensely. “You don’t seem glad. You used to be so full of high spirits—so gay, and now it’s as though . . . and Jared, why . . . what happened? It’s all so confusing. When my aunt told me that you’d married Mr. Colwell . . . and why didn’t you tell me? You didn’t even send me an announcement. Oh, I didn’t mean to talk about this

now. I suppose I shouldn't have mentioned it—but seeing you and . . .” Her voice trailed away.

I found her words disconcerting and her scrutiny unwelcome. I realized I didn't want anyone to look at me too closely nor did I long for a return of the intimacy we had once enjoyed. It would have meant all those confidences she was demanding now and which I had no desire to share with her; she would not have understood. Just as she had not changed in appearance, I was very sure she had not changed her ideals—the ideals I had once possessed myself. At fifteen, I should have scorned the notion of marrying for security, but that is what I had done, and if there were mitigating circumstances, I did not want to discuss them. I wanted my wounds to heal and a protective scar tissue to form. Karen had known Jared, known too how much I had adored him. A resumption of our friendship was too dangerous for me to contemplate. I smiled at her coldly. “Karen dear, your aunt must have told you that Jared is happy, married, and living in Rome—just as I am equally happy here. Wouldn't you like me to show you the house? I am quite outrageously proud of it, and let me tell you, I shall expect your compliments.”

Karen was very perceptive and, accordingly, she ceased all effort to set aside the barriers between us, complimenting me on my color scheme, admiring my selection and arrangement of furniture, and praising my taste in pictures and other

ornaments as impersonally as my other guests eventually did.

The evening was a great success and I found I enjoyed Caleb's friends. Nor did I feel at any disadvantage, because, with the exception of Karen and one or two others, they were at least fifteen years my senior, most being in their mid-to-late forties. In fact, I welcomed the disparity in our ages, for it precluded any real intimacy, though, as I learned when we women retired to the music room, it did not preclude gossip. Yet, though I listened and laughed, at the end of the evening, I could not remember what had been said, nor could I remember the names or faces of the few strangers to whom I had been introduced—it was all a blur, but at least, any fears that I might find time hanging heavy on my hands had been dispelled. In addition to the numerous social gatherings to which I had been invited, there were community activities, largely charitable in nature, in which the women were happy to involve me.

In the following months, I gave more dinner parties and I worked in the local hospital, reading to the sick. I visited orphan asylums, fulminated against child labor, took up subscriptions for the poor, and taught Sunday School at St. John's Episcopal Church. My days were so filled with planning and working that I had little time to manage the house—this, I left to Mrs. Curtis, and amazingly she no longer daunted me—I did not even

think about her, and when Betsey came home from school to stay, she, too, faded into the background. I was aware that she had become an excellent horsewoman and that she went riding quite often on a beautiful mare that Caleb had bought her and which she had christened Zenobia. Sometimes she rode with one or another of the local youths; occasionally she rode with Caleb, but he, too, was busy with his work which sometimes took him out of town.

He was out of town on the evening following my twenty-second birthday and though I rarely missed him, that night I would have welcomed his presence because, for some obscure reason, I felt dreadfully alone and frightened. Perhaps something in me knew that my period of forgetfulness was ending and that soon I should have to commence the business of living or, rather, feeling again, or perhaps it was because my recent birthday had made me aware I had lived another two years without really noticing their passing. At any rate, I was awake that night and restless in the huge canopied bed; staring up at its fringed draperies, I felt confined—walled-in. I needed air. Slipping out of bed, I went to the window, and, though the evening breezes were known to be harmful, even poisonous, I pushed it open, looking up into the night sky.

The stars were very bright and the quarter moon unusually large. Its cold white light was mirrored in a small pool beneath our window. It

was a peaceful enough scene, but it did not soothe me. I still felt confined. I wanted to be out of the room, in the garden—no, away from it, away from the house called Colwell's Crossing—called *Witch's Crossing*, my mind interpolated, and unbidden, I saw her very clearly, a small, thin woman in a tattered, sweat-streaked gray dress. She ran slowly, as if each step were an effort, and behind her, I heard the baying of many dogs. She fell and tried to rise again. I saw her weep and curse the ground, and then the dogs were on her and her shriek of terror was loud in my ears. I put my hands over them, but I could not deaden that thin, eerie sound or stifle the curse she had mouthed as she died.

"Why?" I whispered. "Why did they build this house? It should never have risen on this accursed ground."

Close upon my question came the shattering sound of metal on metal. I cast a startled glance at the clock on the mantelpiece; in the moonlight, I could make out the time; it was ten minutes past midnight! Had Caleb returned unexpectedly? Had he lost his key? I hoped so. I needed him with me that night. As the thunderous sound was repeated, I ran into the hall and, peering down the stairwell, I saw a wavery light below and heard the bolts being drawn. A moment later, I saw him, and he, who knew my old habit, looked up, catching my eye.

"Rissa," he said.

Behind me, there was a shriek, "You're home!" Betsey, clad only in her flannel nightdress, rushed down the stairs and I, following, saw her fling herself into his arms. Over her head, I looked into his blue eyes and I said calmly, "Good evening, Jared."

How may I define the expression in those eyes? There was sadness, there was anger, and there was eagerness, too. He disengaged himself gently from Betsey's clinging arms and moving to me, he said, "Clarissa." Before I could speak, he added, "I will not call you—mother."

"There's certainly no reason for that," I replied, wishing Betsey had not elected to giggle, wishing, too, that she had remained in her room.

"Fancy, Clarissa is your step-mama, Jared," she remarked. "Isn't that odd?"

"Very odd," he agreed, still looking at me.

Betsey continued to giggle, "Then—I must be your step-aunt, isn't that so?"

He looked down at her, seemingly aware of her for the first time. "No, you're too young and too beautiful to be deemed an aunt. I shan't allow it."

"Then—what am I?" she cried.

Placing his finger under her chin, he said, "You're no relation at all, thank God."

A pulse was beating in my throat and pounding in my ears. I felt . . . I did not know what I felt . . . the hall whirled around me. I put out a hand to steady myself and accidentally clutched Jared's arm, feeling it tense beneath my fingers. I took my

hand away quickly, saying with a calmness that startled me, "You've not brought your wife with you, Jared?"

"No," he said. "She's dead."

"Oh!" the sound broke from Mrs. Curtis. "Dead?"

I had not been aware of her until that moment. Now I—all of us in fact—turned to look at her. She stood in a corner of the hall, still holding the candle she had brought with her when she had opened the door. She had spoken in a stricken whisper and I was positive that I saw a glimmer of fear in her eyes, but it was gone in an instant as she added primly, "I am very sorry, I am sure, Master Jared."

"Spare me any paroxysms of grief, Mrs. Curtis," he responded. "Better a short and merry life than withering age and invalidism." Glancing around the hall, he continued, "Talking about age, where is my beloved father?" His eyes rested on mine, "Or rather—your adoring husband, Clarissa."

The tone in which he had spoken was both bitter and accusing. It angered me. I had not left him for another—he had been my whole life until that terrible moment when I had learned of his Italian marriage. However, I took care to keep any ire from my voice as I said, "Caleb is away from home tonight. I expect him back from Boston tomorrow."

Jared smiled, "Good, then we shall all be

present to celebrate your birthday." Moving to me, he lifted my hand and pressed it to his lips. "In fact," he said, still holding it, "it's now after midnight—so may I be the first to wish you many happy returns, Rissa?"

"But . . ." Betsey began.

With a certain melancholy triumph, I spoke over her, saying, "But you're too late, Jared. My birthday was yesterday."

I returned to bed but not to sleep, though I tried hard enough, resolutely counting sheep and, at length, just plain counting so that my thoughts would not stray to the image of Jared in the stairwell. Yet I could not obliterate it. In the treacherous eye of my mind, I again went back to the hall, saw him look up at me, saw the anger in his blue eyes, and heard the accusation in his voice.

"As if *he* had been wronged," I whispered into the darkness and lived again all those emotions I had believed obliterated by time—the anger, the sorrow, the hurt, and the love. I should not have loved him. I did not love him any more. I could not love him any more, the ring on my finger was no longer the little gold friendship band that I had thrown away—thrown into the sea around Barbados on the day of my arrival there. My ring had been given me by Caleb to proclaim me his wife. I was Jared's father's wife, and even as I thought that, I also thought of Betsey in his arms and grew angry beyond all reason at her. It was

her fault that I lay in Caleb's room, was held in Caleb's arms—her fault that I could not go to Jared as I would have done, wife or no wife, pride or no pride. I had no pride. He had betrayed me, and now he had come back with mockery in his smile and accusation in his eyes and it did not matter. Nothing mattered beside the fact that I loved him, still loved him, would always love him, and that was the terrible knowledge that kept me wakeful through the long hours until morning.

I was studying the golden circlet on my finger; it stretched from knuckle to knuckle—viselike, it tightened, cutting off my circulation.

"Mrs. Colwell!" The voice, impatient and feminine, was faint in my ears.

"Clarissa." The second voice was less urgent, softer.

With a slight shock, I raised my eyes from my prisoned finger to take in my surroundings. For the moment, I had forgotten where I was or what I was doing and as the circlet on my finger shrank to its proper thickness, I looked at Mrs. Russell, who had spoken first, and at my friend Karen, who was visiting her again, and at the three other women, who were on the committee for the Harvest Ball to be given in a fortnight, the proceeds designated for the new orphans' home. I said, "I am sorry, I am afraid I was woolgathering. What did you say, Mrs. Russell?"

The lady, short, stout, and determined, gave

me a sharp glance out of shrewd brown eyes. "I asked if you would tell us what progress you have been making in selling tickets, Mrs. Colwell?"

Fortunately for my peace of mind, I had been selling tickets for a week prior to Jared's arrival. I had sent out many letters and now the replies were coming in and I could cite a quota satisfactory enough to mollify Mrs. Russell for my moments of distraction. Yet, even as the ring on my finger seemed hopelessly confining, the large, beautiful room in which we were sitting was stifling to me. I had great difficulty concentrating on the subject at hand—the decorations for the ball-room in the Lyttleton mansion—a topic that had actually interested me before. Impatiently, I stared out of the window—would the meeting never end? Yet, when it ended, I should have to go home. I did not want to go home. I wanted to be far, far away from this house where for the past three days I had been seeing Jared at mealtimes, meeting him in the hallway or in the garden. Everywhere I turned, I found him. But when he was not with me, it was even worse, for then I wondered where he had gone and knew that he was generally with my sister, whom he had barely noticed in the old days. This very morning, rising early, I had heard the sound of hooves and from my bedroom window had seen them, Betsey and Jared, riding together, and even as I had looked, Betsey had laughed and spurred her horse forward with Jared, also laughing, catching up

with her quickly. How I had resented their laughter. How I had resented their growing companionship! How I resented the woman who had died! Horrid of her to have died so that Jared might come home for me to see and to want and to know I could never have him and to know, too, it was folly to want him, when I had a husband, a good kind husband, who loved me and to whom I dared not expose my inner turmoil. That was the worst of the situation, the necessity, the absolute necessity of remaining calm and serene, as submissive as I had been in the past two years. Looking back on it, I realized that I had been living in a sort of suspended animation, neither quite alive nor quite dead. How I longed for a return to that existence. I did not want to feel anything, and of a sudden, all the passions that had been strangers to me had descended upon me. In looking around the room, I saw my face reflected in a large mirror. With a little start of surprise, I examined it—it was as calm as ever, not even my eyes betrayed my warring emotions! I had a moment of being devoutly thankful for that, but oddly, I resented the youth of that mirrored countenance. I wanted it to be older, much older—Eloise's age. If I could have been his mother's age, I might have looked on Jared as my son; then it would have been safe to love him.

“The meeting is dismissed.” Mrs. Russell's crisp voice cut across my thoughts again. With difficulty, I brought myself back to the present,

once more trying to focus my attention on the plans for the Harvest Ball; yet, when I left her house, I had no recollection of anything that had been said in the meeting. I was not even thinking about it, as I waited for William to bring the carriage; I was in that huge ballroom of the Lytleton mansion, and in my mind's eye, I could see Jared dancing. He had always waltzed so beautifully, so gracefully. And who would he be holding in his arms—one or another of the unmarried young women of the town. His partner's hair, as I saw it, was blond, as blond as his—Betsey, of course! It would be Betsey, and on the spokes of her fan his name would be written for all the waltzes. I knew that, too.

"Oh, God," I cried soundlessly, "why can't I die?"

"Mrs. Colwell." It was William at my side, opening the carriage door for me.

As I climbed inside, I reflected that I would have preferred it to be a tumbril—with the guillotine around the next bend in the road.

My mood, as we drove back to Colwell's Crossing, was one of extreme ambiguity. I did not want to see our house guest. I did want to see him. I had had no private conversation with him since his return, all I knew of his affairs had come to me from Caleb, who had proved unexpectedly taciturn concerning his son—or perhaps, he had not been *unexpectedly* taciturn. He knew my old

feelings for Jared—he had been aware of my hopes and plans. Did he believe my feelings dead because of Jared's betrayal? He had not mentioned the past nor had we spoken of the tragedy that had overtaken Jared; indeed, his one reference to his late daughter-in-law had been elliptical.

"I could not turn him away now," he had said to me. "I had to give him permission to stay while he pulls his life together." He had spoken defensively, as though he had expected me to protest. I had been aware, too, of a new intensity in his gaze.

I had maintained my composure. "Of course Jared must stay here. I should not want it any other way." Possibly he had wanted further reassurances, possibly he had wanted me to tell him that Jared meant nothing to me any more, but I could not have lied that convincingly. I had concentrated all my efforts on producing an impersonal tone—impersonal and, at the same time, concerned in the way that a polite stranger might be concerned. But I had been glad of the shawl I had been wearing, for my heart had been beating so heavily that I was sure he would have detected the movement through the thin silk of my bodice.

Much to my relief, Betsey had entered then, ending all possibility of further conversation. Thinking about her now, I was plagued once more by her growing intimacy with Jared. If she and I had been closer, she might have confided

her feelings to me, but in the three days since he had been with us, it had been borne on me more than ever how very much we had grown apart. She seemed on better terms with Mrs. Curtis than with me. For the first time in years, I tried to imagine what I had done to cause the rift between myself and my sister, but, as usual, I could think of no explanation for her attitude. I had a moment of passionate longing for life as it used to be when the four of us were really together—my father, my mother, Betsey, and myself. We had been closer then, she and I—we had! But there was no sense in dwelling on the past because that brought Jared back, too—Jared, as he used to be, before I had discovered the stairwell held no more magic. A gust of wind smote my face. I looked down to find that the carriage had halted and that William had opened the door for me—behind him, loomed Colwell's Crossing. Its bulk startled me—I had been back at Oakhurst.

I hurried out of the carriage, but I did not want to go inside, not yet. "I'm going to take a little walk, William," I told him, as he started for the front door.

It was not a day for walking. A chill, crisp wind was blowing and those leaves which yet clung dryly to the branches of the sycamore trees were being dislodged from their eyries to rain through the garden. In the adjoining field, the tall yellowed grasses were bent against those insistent breezes and even through my seal pelisse, I felt

their bite. The sky was lowering—the sun, masked by heavy clouds, glowed redly on the distant horizon. Yet, it was beautiful in its way. I stood a moment looking at those rosy distances, and as I did, a wedge of cloud detached itself from the mass. It was long and narrow and, as usual, I saw a shape in it: a bird, a giant bird coming toward me on great leathery wings—not a bird, a bat. And again I thought of the witch who had died somewhere on these grounds. I shuddered, actually hearing her labored breathing. Then a hand was placed on my arm. With a gasp of fear, I turned to find Jared at my side.

“Clarissa,” he said softly, “I’m sorry if I startled you.”

“What do you want?” I demanded, trying to free myself from his grip.

He would not let me go. “Come with me,” he ordered, leading me in the direction of the old summer house.

I did not want to go with him and yet, I did, and while these conflicting thoughts were going on in my head, we had arrived at our destination. Looking at its broken lattices and sagging floor, he demanded, “How did this escape rehabilitation?”

I shook my head. I could have replied that I had forgotten it, but because we had met in it so often, I knew he would not believe me. I had wanted to tear it down. I had meant to do so, yet I had hesitated. Now, facing him, I wished I had. I

said coldly, "Well, we're here—what do you want to tell me?"

He did not answer. Instead, he dragged me inside and kissed me. The action was so totally unexpected that it took me by surprise. Liar! It did not take me by surprise. In all honesty, I can only say that I had wanted it, longed for it since the moment when I had looked down into the stairwell, three nights before! I clung to him—we clung to each other in an embrace which had all the passion I thought I no longer possessed. Yet, even then, I had the strength to pull myself away. I drew back from him, my hand to my mouth. I said shakily, "We . . . you . . . we have no . . ."

"We have no right," he finished for me. "You are my father's wife. Oh, God, Clarissa, how could you marry that old man!?"

"Old man!?" I echoed angrily. "He's *not* old." Indignantly, I continued, "You are the last who should reproach me. I did not go to Rome. I did not marry that woman!" As I faced him, the years rolled back and once more, I heard Caleb telling me about Jared's letter. "You . . . you didn't even have the . . . the courage to . . . write and . . . and tell me about it!" I cried. "You left it for your—your father to—explain—you . . ."

His hand was over my mouth, "Don't say any more," he commanded. "You don't understand . . . you don't know why I did it."

"I know!" I said, striving to coat my tones with

contempt, but achieving only agony. "You needed her money."

"Yes," he acknowledged. "I did need it—but not for the reasons you imagine—not because I wanted a soft life of luxury. I needed it because I wanted to finish my studies—and my father had refused to send me any more money. I couldn't have come home, Clarissa—not when I was learning so much. Lucy understood. She knew I didn't love her, but she was lonely and ill. I thought"—he paused and sighed—"it's madness what I thought, Clarissa—but I was doing it for us."

"Us!" I cried.

"Us!" he reiterated. "I knew she couldn't live too long, Clarissa—and in the back of my mind—I had the hope I could come back to you afterwards and we..."

I made myself laugh. "It was a hope you didn't bother to confide in me," I accused.

"I was going to write to you," he said. "I was going to tell you all about it ... as soon as I had sorted out my thinking ... I was confused, too. I won't go into the situation now ... but it was complicated and ... I ... I couldn't know you'd marry my father so quickly. My father!" He seized me by the shoulders. "How could you do it? How could you?"

"Because my sister was ill and needed prompt medical care that I could not provide—because my parents were dead—because there was no

money and because Caleb was kind to me. I needed kindness—then and . . .”

“So you were practical, too,” he said. “Both of us were driven by the same impetus—self-preservation. Well, we’ve been preserved and look at us.” His mouth twisted. “Oh, God, Clarissa, if you knew what it does to me—to be living in the same house with you, knowing that each night you are with him. I should never have come back, but I couldn’t stay away—I had to see you. I had to . . .” Pulling me toward him, he embraced me again.

I tried to free myself, but he would not release me and part of me did not want to be freed from that warmth, that closeness for which I had yearned so long. I said brokenly, “You mustn’t . . . it’s too late . . . too late.”

“Come away with me, Clarissa,” he whispered. “I have money now . . . lots of money, more than my father, and I have plans. I want to work at my profession in New York. I’ll set up an office . . .”

“I can’t . . . it would be too cruel,” I cried.

“Cruel to whom?”

“Caleb has been wonderful to me, I couldn’t desert him. He wouldn’t be able to bear it a—a second time.”

“But what about you . . . what about us?” Jared demanded. “And can he be happy knowing what we’ve been to each other . . . knowing we still care for each other?”

“He will not know!” Finally, I could pull away from him. “I shall never tell him.”

"My father is a very perceptive man—you won't have to tell him. He has eyes, he can see."

"He will not see! I shall not let him see. I shall not do anything to cause him pain. It's too late for us . . . too late . . . too late forever!" Turning, I ran from the summer house and, though Jared called my name, he did not pursue me.

By the time I had neared the house, I had slowed to a sedate walk. I tried the garden door but it was locked. I would have preferred entering by the kitchen but that could have caused comment since I had never done so before. Accordingly, I went to the front door, and I was fumbling for my key when Mrs. Curtis opened it. Muttering a flustered "Thank you," I hurried past her up the stairs. I had installed a large mirror at the top of the stairs and as I reached the first landing, I came face to face with my own reflection and stopped in horror. I had not known that my hat was awry and my hair tumbling down—I had not known that my face was so flushed. What had Mrs. Curtis thought? All the old fears and the old resentments came flooding back. Why hadn't I found some reason to dismiss her? I ran into the bedroom and fell on the bed, burying my face in the pillow.

"What shall I do?" I cried. "What . . . what . . . what?"

I had no answers. The only solution that I could see was sending Jared away, but I had no power to do that, nor had I, I realized bitterly,

the inclination—and with that realization came a wave of such guilt that I hated myself and Jared, too—but most of all, such was my confusion that my greatest resentment was directed at the man whose actions had caused our separation—Caleb!

It was close upon this thought that I heard a horse neigh wildly beneath my window. Accompanying its neighing was an angry yell. Hurrying to the window, I saw my husband mounted on a huge black horse. As I watched, the animal reared up, teetering dangerously on its hind legs only to be thrust down by Caleb; again it reared, and I heard a scream as Betsey darted from a side door, staring at Caleb in horror.

“Be careful!” she shrilled. “He’ll savage you.”

Caleb did not even glance at her—his attention was on the horse and, at length, he subdued it. I drew back; my heart was pounding again, but I knew it was ridiculous to worry about Caleb. He had a way with horses.

Betsey’s laughter drew me back to the window. Her fright had vanished; she was jumping up and down, clapping her hands. “Bravo!” she called. “Now let me ride him.”

Caleb shook his head. “Not yet.” He wheeled around and cantered toward the stables.

Betsey stamped her foot and slowly walked away, her shoulders drooping, and I knew that if I had seen her face, she would have looked sullen and angry. However, at the risk of incurring her greater enmity, I resolved to ask Caleb not to let

her ride that horse. In fact, I wished I might demand that he, too, refrain. Though I knew little about horses, it seemed to me that it was entirely too vicious.

"Vicious!" Caleb, arrested in the act of sipping his wine, set down the glass, looking at me with surprise. We were at dinner and I had managed to bring up the subject of his new acquisition. As Betsey and Jared stared at me, I wished I had kept silent, for both of them laughed and not kindly.

"Clarissa knows nothing about horses," Betsey spoke loftily, glad, I knew, to demonstrate her superior knowledge.

"Nothing, obviously," Caleb agreed. "Belcore is a fine animal, part Arabian."

"Part Arabian?" Jared echoed. "And where did you find such a beast around here?"

At an auction—the Sanderson stables," Caleb explained.

"Sanderson?" Jared raised his eyebrows. "They're auctioning off their horses? Why?"

Caleb shrugged. "Reverses." Then, fastening his eyes on Jared, he added meaningfully, "Unwise speculations."

For some reason, Jared flushed. "The investments I have in mind, are sound," he said defensively. "It's a solid company. It's been in business a long time."

"Sanderson said much the same to me, months back," Caleb told him.

Inwardly, I sighed; I longed to bring the subject back to Belcore and what I was sure was his vicious behavior, but I could not find an opening. Furthermore, I wondered at Jared sitting there discussing horses and the Sanderson failure so calmly with his father a scant two hours after he had begged me to run away with him. How could he be so cool—indeed, how could I sit there in my chair as I had sat night after night, while all the time my heart was beating so furiously? Actually, it was an agony for me to sit there. I longed to run from the room, and at the same time, I hated these emotions that had overwhelmed me and longed for that period when I had passively accepted my new life. It was too difficult to be awake again—awake and aware of the currents and undercurrents disturbing that quiet pool which had been my existence.

In the days that followed, I was alternately glad and sorry because the plans for the Harvest Ball absorbed so much of my time. It was still difficult for me to concentrate on small details, yet these same small details kept me from dwelling on the larger problem of Jared, and though I was not—could not—be resigned to his presence in the house, the fact that I was away so often, first buying and then overseeing the disposition of the decorations in the ballroom, did relieve me of the burden of being with him more than at dinner. Still, it did not keep me from wondering if he

meant to stay with us forever, and if he did, would I be able to subdue my feelings and accept his presence?

Yet, though I diligently searched for the answers to these questions, I did not find them, and the anxiety they caused me was the more agonizing because I needed to conceal it from my husband. It is to the chaotic state of my mind that I attribute my total lack of awareness in regard to those forces in the house that eventually erupted so disastrously. If I had not tried to avoid Jared, if I had wondered more at Betsey's increasing hostility towards me, if I had tried to speak to her, reason with her, would I have succeeded in breaking down her reserves and establishing some manner of communion with her again? If I had, would the events that started the night of the ball have been forestalled, or are all of us creatures of an inexorable fate that must overtake us? The idea of predestination has always struck me as terribly arbitrary, declaring that no matter how you conduct your life, you are doomed or not doomed to burn in everlasting flames. Yet, many of the worthy citizens buried in Massachusetts graveyards lived out their lives under the shadow of this belief, so it is possible that even had I been completely aware of all that was going on at Colwell's Crossing, I should have been unable to prevent what eventually transpired. Looked at in that particular light, predestination is a comforting doctrine, absolving

me of all blame; I should like to believe in it—I wish I could.

The Harvest Ball was scheduled to begin at eight, which meant that I, as part of the receiving line, had to be there at least half an hour ahead of time, and, consequently, I began my toilet at six. It was a lengthy process, mainly because of my hair. Though I had recently taken to wearing it in coronet braids, various of the ladies had begged me to make a concession to the occasion and dress it fashionably. I had decided on an elaborate arrangement of puffs with three "careless" curls straying down one shoulder. Since my hair had always been Indian-straight, those "careless" curls were achieved with papers and an iron wielded by May Barnes, a new young maid who had been recruited into our household a week earlier, Janet having no skill as a hairdresser. Fortunately, May did and knew just how long to heat the irons. She had gentle hands and I escaped singing and pulling, but I was not in the mood to have my hair twisted into such an unnatural style and I fear I muttered, frowned, and fretted, an attitude that distressed May and, worse yet, made her nervous, so that when she started hooking up my ball gown, her fingers were very clumsy.

"Oh," I said, "let me do it, please. You are all thumbs."

"Oh, miss," she half-sobbed.

I was immediately contrite, "I'm sorry, May. I'm in a dreadful mood," I apologized, privately

wishing myself across seven seas and wondering desperately how I, Clarissa Lovell, had come to be part of a receiving line at a ridiculous charity ball.

"But, miss"—May's hesitant voice broke into my thoughts—"you look so beautiful and it's such a lovely gown."

It was lovely, but because of the numerous fittings I had been forced to endure before its completion, to me, it only represented hours of standing still while pins were thrust into it and often into me—furthermore, though it was a miracle of the dressmaker's art, it was also extremely uncomfortable—mainly because of my corset and bustle. Each time I took a deep breath, I felt steel cutting into my flesh, and as for my bustle, it made me feel strangely encumbered in back. Still, when I gazed into my full-length mirror, I could echo May's encomium—I did look beautiful. The elaborate arrangement of my dark hair was becoming, especially since it was topped by a small circlet of diamonds, Caleb's gift the previous Christmas. More evidence of his generosity was present in the golden chain ending in the topaz and diamond pendant that matched my yellow silk gown. As for the gown itself, it almost merited all my suffering. Cut low over the bosom, it was puffed at the sleeves and elaborately ruffled through the bodice; there were more ruffles at the hem, and broad satin ribbons were tied over the bustle and stitched with yellow silk roses. I wore

lace mitts, and on one wrist hung the painted ivory fan Caleb had found in a Boston store.

"Oh, miss," May breathed again. "You look like the princess in a fairy tale."

"She is the princess in a fairy tale. Mine," Caleb said from the doorway of his dressing room.

I made myself smile at him and I kept my voice low and soft as I answered, "You are my prince."

"Not true . . . not true . . ." denied a small voice in my head, but the quickest glance in the mirror assured me that my expression did not betray me. The years I had spent at Colwell's Crossing had given me self-control. I moved to Caleb and smiled into his eyes, surprising a look of doubt.

"Your prince?" he repeated.

"My king," I amended quickly, marveling at the lightness of my tone.

"I should rather be your prince," he sighed.

"I'd rather be your queen," I laughed.

"Would you?" He took my hands and started pulling me toward him, and I knew I was in danger of having my gown crushed, but I was saved by the tinkle of the little French clock on the mantelpiece.

"Oh!" I exclaimed. "It's seven."

"Seven?" Reluctantly, he dropped my hands. "Is that the witching hour—when pumpkins become coaches?"

I laughed with relief. "I fear they must—I am needed."

He looked at me. "Yes, you are needed, Clarissa," he said. "More than you know, I think." He had spoken softly and at a moment when I had crossed to the closet to fetch my cloak and so could pretend I had not heard him.

I said, "I'm sorry, dear. What did you say?"

"Nothing, my love." He took my cloak, draping it over my shoulders. "How beautiful you are, Clarissa," he said ardently. His lips were on my ear. "Damn all Harvest Balls."

Prompted by my own guilt, I said, "We do not need to go."

His hands were tight on my shoulders. "Need we not?"

I made myself relax against him, and because I longed to be away from him, from the house, and above all from the man whose room was across the hall from ours, I whispered, "Let's forget the Harvest Ball, Caleb."

He stepped away from me. "No," he said firmly, "I could not be selfish enough to deprive the county of your beauty, my love. It's a sight to be shared."

Moments later, we were in the carriage; it was a cold night, and through the trees, the moon glimmered like a small pale silver coin. It was just as we were turning into the high road that I thought of Betsey, whom I had not seen that evening.

"Will Jared bring my sister to the ball?" I asked.

Caleb nodded. "She looked very lovely this evening. At least so I thought until I saw her sister."

"Come," I chided, "Betsey's lovelier than I. She is young."

"Young?" he echoed. "And you are not?"

"Younger than I," I corrected hastily. "That's what I meant."

"Is it?" he probed. "Or did you mean that marriage with a man who might have been your father-in-law has robbed you of your youth?"

"I did not mean that," I assured him, taking his hand. "Believe me, Caleb."

I received a comforting clasp, then, gently, he freed his hand and sighed, "You are an upright and honorable young woman, Clarissa. You abide by your promises. I should expect no more."

"But I assure you—" I began.

"Please," he interrupted, "it has been a day of assurances and arguments—I want neither, now."

The silence that fell between us made me uneasy and I sensed his strain and knew, without his telling me, that the presence of his son in the house was as difficult for him to endure as it was for me.

Despite my reluctance to attend the ball, I could only be glad when we turned into the circular driveway of the Lyttleton mansion. The house, old and Georgian in design, was one of the largest in the country. It was ablaze with lights and already more people than I would have imagined had arrived. I must have exchanged greetings

with over a dozen persons before I escaped to the ballroom, where, much to my relief, no one had come yet. I had the immense room to myself, and I admit to a certain sense of pride and accomplishment when I saw how beautiful my decorations looked. Autumn flowers, wheat, and leaves garlanded the walls and were reflected in the long mirrored panels set at intervals around the room.

I sat down in one of the spindly chairs pushed against the wall and wished that the emptiness about me signified the end rather than the beginning of the evening, and even as this thought occurred to me, I remembered that once I had looked forward to just such a ball as this, given in this same mansion, some four years earlier. I had dreamed of the night, dreamed, too, of dancing with Jared, and when, at last, it had arrived, I had been so happy that even with my feet aching from waltzing, I had wanted it to go on forever. Inadvertently, I glanced in the mirror behind my chair and saw myself reflected in it by another mirror across the room, while superimposed over this image, I seemed to see a couple dancing, imprisoned in the glass, whirling down an endless corridor. Impatiently, I turned away, willing my memories to vanish, and glad as I had been to be alone, I was equally pleased when Mrs. Russell came bustling in, full of greetings and instructions.

Some time later, freed from my duties on the receiving line, I stood behind a clump of potted

palms, watching the dancers. I was not in the mood to waltz, though I had dutifully whirled around the floor with Caleb and several other men. Betsey was dancing with my husband, and Jared, who had come with her, waltzed with Karen Russell. They made an attractive couple—she was in a soft blue gown which set off her golden hair and deep blue eyes to perfection and he looked slim and elegant in his evening attire. Watching him, I was glad he had not asked me to dance; it had spared me the embarrassment of refusing him. Conversely, I envied and resented Karen's slender hand on his shoulder and wished the music would end, but it had just begun. She was smiling up at him and he was whispering something in her ear—what was he saying? Karen and Jared. I had never matched them in my thinking, but it was a possibility. She would inherit quite a bit of money, her lineage was impeccable, she was beautiful—my imagination, taking further wing, had them standing side by side in St. John's but just as the minister pronounced them "man and wife," Jared magically materialized at my side. I looked at him, startled, aware now that the music had ended.

"You must give me this dance, Clarissa," he commanded. Seizing my hand and ignoring my protests, he whirled me onto the floor, holding me lightly and smiling down at me, but there was no smile in his eyes—they were intent and sober. I wanted to pull away but, conscious of the other

couples around us, I preferred not to make a scene, and then the music was in my ears and once more the mirrors contained our whirling image. I saw it in two of them and closed my eyes as we passed a third.

"Clarissa," Jared said softly, "do you know what I should like to do?" When I did not answer, he laughed. "I should like to dance you through those doors over there—into the garden, and do you know what would happen then?"

"I do not care to know," I answered.

"I shall tell you anyway. I would take you into a waiting coach and we'd drive to the end of the world. Does the suggestion appeal to you?"

"What a tease you are, Jared," I laughed.

His hand tightened on my arm and I saw we were very close to those doors he had mentioned. "Shall I prove to you that I am not teasing?" he whispered fiercely.

I halted midstep and, with equal ferocity, I cautioned, "Remember who I am and your own identity as well. As I told you, the time has passed for us!"

He looked at me very intently. "That's your last word on the subject, then? You'll not change your mind, Rissa?"

"Not ever!" I hissed. "You've no right to ask." I broke from him and, striving to walk with dignity, made my way to the chairs where some sullen young girls and a few older women sat, fan-

ning themselves. Ignoring their curious glances, I sat down, a distance apart from them.

Jared did not follow me. I saw him go toward the terrace doors and then I closed my eyes, willing myself not to wish that I had gone with him to that carriage he had mentioned. Did it really exist? Had he expected me to accompany him? No, I could not believe that. He had only been provoking me to the answer he must have known I should give. Knowing me, he would have guessed, too, how I would respond to his suggestion. Yet . . .

"My dance, I believe, Mrs. Colwell."

The words, pleasantly spoken, cut through my thoughts and, opening my eyes, I looked up into the smiling face of Alan Struthers, son of Judge Struthers, an old friend of Caleb's. Though he had asked me to dance out of duty rather than inclination, for he was engaged to Lucy Martin and rarely left her side, to refuse him would have been rude. Obediently, I rose, and again I was whirled across the floor, and again, inadvertently, I glanced into those mirrors and saw Betsey in Jared's arms, smiling up at him as once I had smiled, while he gazed as ardently into her eyes as ever he had into mine. Then, as I watched, he whirled her toward the terrace doors.

"No!" I cried.

"Mrs. Colwell!" Alan Struthers gave me a startled glance and I, missing a step, tangled with him and fell.

Amid a chorus of exclamation from couples near us, Mr. Struthers extricated himself from my engulfing skirts and gallantly assisted me to my feet, the while my mumbled apologies matched his more vociferous assertions of self-blame. As he started to lead me to a chair, Caleb reached us.

"Are you hurt?" he demanded sharply.

To my utter chagrin, tears filled my eyes, my mouth trembled, and almost without thinking, I blurted, "Take me home, oh, please, take me out of here!!"

"Of course, my dear," he said soothingly.

It was not until we were in the carriage that I remembered why I had fallen and saw, in my mind's eye, Jared leading Betsey into the garden. I clutched Caleb's arm. "Betsey . . ." I whispered. "How will she get home?"

"The same way she came, my dear—with Jared," he answered reasonably.

I blamed my fall for the moan that escaped me. I told myself it was ridiculous to harbor such suspicions as I entertained. If Jared had led my sister from the ballroom, it was not to a waiting coach, but only for air. The coach was only something he had conjured up to plague me. I was positive of that!

Still, I did not sleep well that night, my mind was too full of anguished suppositions which I did not dare voice to Caleb for fear he might accuse me of unreasoning jealousy. Toward dawn, I decided he would have been right to make that as-

sertion. On that, I fell asleep and did not awaken until noon, when the discovery of assorted aches and pains from my fall kept me abed another two hours. Thus, it was not until mid-afternoon that I learned Betsey and Jared had eloped.

My initial reaction on hearing the news, confided to me by an excited and apprehensive Janet, was shock. Later, there was anger, and still later, anguish. All my emotions were misdirected. My anger was vented on Betsey, the anguish reserved for Jared. I could only be glad that when I had heard the news Caleb was out seeking information about the runaways. I would not have wanted him to see me or be with me when, in the privacy of our bedroom, I alternated between rage and despair. At the height of my fury, I found that you could indeed tear your hair. Later, I cried until no more tears would come, until my eyes were aching and my face swollen. I felt as bereft and betrayed as I had on that day Caleb had told me of Jared's first marriage.

"How could he? How could she? Why, why, why???" I whispered over and over again. "They don't love each other, they couldn't love each other." Frantically, I searched my memory for any hint of the attraction that had culminated in this disgraceful act! I could recall Betsey and Jared dancing together—certainly her glances had been provocative, but she had bestowed those same glances on Caleb and certainly she had no passion

for him! She . . . but it did no good to seek reasons . . . the fact remained. She had run away with Jared.

"He did not love her!" I wailed. "It was me he wanted!" I turned cold as I recalled our encounter at the ball.

Had he planned to elope with her before he spoke to me. Of course, he must have—the waiting carriage must have been for Betsey, but he had made one last effort to sway me. I had a vision of myself, pretending disdain, pretending anger, when all the while, I should have given my soul to follow him across the garden to the waiting carriage! I saw myself seated next to him on the wide leather seat, watched him take me in his arms—but even as he bent over me, the woman he held so ardently dwindled in size, became more fragile, her dark hair changing to blond, and it was Betsey, he held. Betsey, for whose sake I had sacrificed my happiness and embarked upon this loveless marriage with my enemy—for in that hour of grief, all my old rancor against Caleb returned. Because of him—because of his ring on my finger, Betsey had fled with Jared, my love, my only love, and I was alone forever!

Fortunately, Caleb did not return until late that night, and though I was still awake when he came to bed, my wild anger had dissipated and I could say calmly, "Have you had any news?"

"Yes," he asserted. "I've received a telegram. They were married in Danbury this morning."

"So be it," I shrugged. "I wish them well." Relief flooded through me; I had spoken without a tremor.

"The damned fool!" Caleb exploded. "Why did he do it? Why did she? To run away like two criminals in the night?!"

There was only one answer to his question—a passion that demanded instant assuaging; yet I could no more advance that excuse than I could believe it. Why had Jared eloped with Betsey? Then I thought of another answer. Revenge! I shuddered. Was Betsey the instrument of his revenge? My anger returned and with it was fear. "Oh, Caleb, can't we go after them—can't we bring them back?" I cried. "She's too young ... she ..."

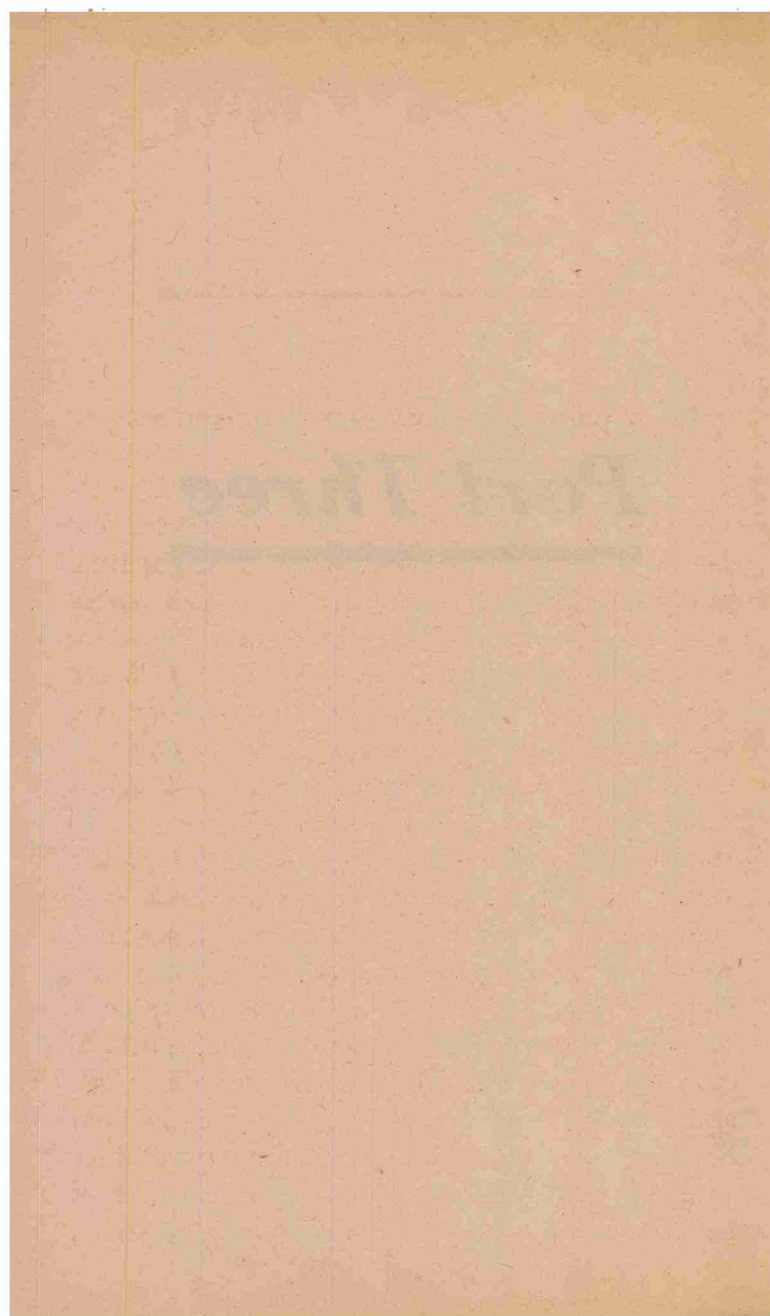
"It's too late," Caleb said. He sighed, "And perhaps it's for the best."

For the bes—" I started to echo and then I stopped, seeing the look in his eye. I knew then that he was aware my concern was not for my sister. Did he know, too, how much I still loved Jared? A few more words from me and he would have no doubts. It was then that I discovered I could not hurt him that badly—he had been kind to me, kind to Betsey, too. For the first time, I wondered how her precipitous departure had affected him. Surely her ingratitude must have shocked him; then, too, there was the matter of Jared. Even if father and son did not agree, Caleb must have been wounded by this enormous

breach of hospitality. I said. "Yes, it is for the best." I could not help adding. "But what will happen to them?"

He put his arms around me, drawing me close to him, and turned down the gaslight, leaving us in darkness save for the dying embers of the fire. "That need no longer be of any concern to us," he declared with the chill finality of a judge passing sentence.

Part Three



On a morning in early March, sixteen months after the elopement of my sister and the man I had taken to describing as my "stepson," I awakened after a night of extremely fitful slumber and lay looking out of the window at the brightening sky. I should have preferred it to be still dotted with stars and illumined by the moon. I was not looking forward to this day—Jared and Betsey were coming home, or rather, they were coming to stay with us for an undefined period of time.

Circumstance rather than choice had determined their return. Caleb had not given me all the specifics, but I gathered that Jared had made a series of investments on Wall Street in a firm closely involved with Jay Cooke and Company, whose collapse the previous September had precipitated a panic engulfing all the states. In common with thousands of other stockholders, he had sustained heavy losses. Then, in December, my sister had contracted a case of grippe that had left her very weak and in need of the sort of care Jared could not afford to provide. It had been at her request that he had finally written to Caleb

and naturally, my husband had invited them back to Colwell's Crossing. As he said, and as I heartily concurred, he could have done nothing else. Yet, neither of us was happy about the situation. After composing the letter, to which I had added a postscript, he had remarked, "I do not have the instincts of a patriarch, Clarissa. Believe me, my dear, other arrangements will be made long before your time is due."

I had flushed and mumbled something unintelligible, which I hoped he would construe as agreement. Much as I sympathized with my sister's plight, I knew the reunion between Betsey and myself would be fraught with awkwardness and pain. Beyond a terse note stating that they had gone to New York, we had heard nothing from either one of them in all the time they had been gone. Though I had eventually become reconciled to the fact that I might never hear from Betsey or Jared again, it had been quite a while before I had regained the calm that had marked the first two years of my marriage. Then, in February, I discovered that I was expecting a child. I had not been prepared for the excitement, the utter joy I experienced when Dr. Lamb conveyed that news to me. At last, life had some meaning for me—I was no longer merely passing time. I had a purpose, a reason for existing!

There was a sound of heavy breathing in my ear: someone had been running for a long time

and was winded, gasping for breath. I knew it was the witch—risen from her grave again, bringing with her curses and calamity. Was I hearing with my ears or with my mind? For a second longer the air was troubled, and outside the rising sun was obscured by a passing shard of cloud. Then the room was bright again, and the only breathing was Caleb's as he lay deep in slumber beside me. I slipped out of bed and went to the window, kneeling on the seat. I had heard that phantom breathing before. When? In another second, I remembered—it had been just before Jared had invited me into the summer house.

"Clarissa . . ."

I started, and turned to find Caleb, awake and frowning at me. "Yes, dear." I tried to smile reassuringly.

"You'll catch a chill," he warned.

"I've not been here long enough for that." I produced another conciliating smile. Approaching fatherhood weighed heavily on Caleb. He had become unduly protective—his manner was that of a young husband to whom the whole experience was new. It was as if Jared had not existed, I thought as I went back to bed. I shivered—but he did exist and soon he and his wife would be under our roof again.

"You are cold," Caleb accused.

"No," I demurred. "It was only someone walking over my grave."

"Don't say that!" he exclaimed.

"It's only an expression," I soothed, as I slipped back beneath the covers.

"It's an expression I will not tolerate!" He put his arms around me gently, protectively, lovingly. "Nothing must happen to you, Clarissa. Nothing." He spoke challengingly, as if he were crossing swords with an unknown menace, and I wondered if he, too, might have heard that ghostly breathing.

Jared and Betsey arrived in the afternoon. I did not go to the station to welcome them. Notwithstanding the fact that eight months stretched between the present and the birth of the child, whom we both wanted to be a son, Caleb had put restrictions on my movements. The railway station with its dust and cinders was forbidden me. I was both glad and sorry; it might have been easier to encounter Betsey and Jared in the impersonality and the bustle of the station rather than in the parlor, where the awkwardness would be more pronounced. Yet the ride home in the carriage would also have had its share of tense moments. Either way I did not expect that our initial meeting would be an easy one.

As I waited for them in the parlor, I tried to concentrate on my knitting. It needed concentration, for it was a skill that did not come easily to me. Mrs. Curtis, an expert at the craft, was always

picking up my dropped stitches and closing holes in the little white coat, which was the first of my endeavors. I thought of her and of my initial reaction to her when I had first taken up residence at Colwell's Crossing. I had disliked her and I had been eager to rid myself of her—well, I had not done it. There had been no opportunity and no reason, but though she did her work well she still remained distant and cool, and I still had the impression she tolerated rather than accepted my presence in her employer's house. Her reaction on learning I was expecting a child had been muted. I even thought I had discerned chill disapproval in her gray eyes—but those eyes were rarely warm. It occurred to me that I had never seen her laugh, but I had seen her distressed: on the night of Jared's first return, on the night she learned his wife had died. Why? Had it been sympathy for his grief? I could not know. She really was an enigma, and though I had nothing substantial on which to base my distrust, I could not help thinking she disliked me. In fact, I realized, I had always suspected her of plotting my downfall—a ridiculous supposition, of course. Not that I could suspect her of coveting my husband. What did I suspect, and why was I devoting so much time to these futile ruminations?

I had an answer for that. I did not want to think about the impending arrival of Jared and Betsey. I did not want to see them again. No, that was not

true, either. I could not rid myself of my concern for Betsey any more than I could forget how much I had once loved her—still loved her, despite her hostility. What had happened between us? Why had she turned away from me? Why had she not written? It was dreadful! It was inexcusable! And Jared . . . no, I would not think of him. I would not think of either of them, not yet. It was easier to concentrate on Mrs. Curtis, whose unexpressed enmity, if enmity it were, did not matter to me—but if it did not matter, why did I think about it at all? Curiosity?

If Mrs. Curtis did not want Caleb, why did she resent me? Had she been devoted to Jared's mother? No. She had arrived at Colwell's Crossing after Eloise's departure—she had been in residence at the house for some seven years before Caleb returned. During that time, she must have felt it to be her house. Was that it? Yes, it must be. It was the house she loved, and to her, everyone was an intruder to be tolerated only as long as they did not disturb the pattern of her days. Had she felt as threatened by me as I by her and . . . My musing was interrupted by the sound of carriage wheels in the driveway—they had arrived! Bracing myself, I waited.

The door was opened to them, and, as she had begged him once, long ago, Caleb bore Betsey over the threshold and into the parlor, Jared

following. Wrapped in shawls, Betsey lay as limp as a rag doll. She was very thin, her face was pallid and her eyes enormous. As Caleb would have deposited her on a couch, she fastened both hands on his arm, clinging to him convulsively, and uttering little moans of protest. He had some difficulty in extricating himself from a grip which brought to my mind the tendrils of a vine, tenuous but surprisingly fast.

A glance at Jared heightened my sense of shock and added an element of foreboding—he was looking at Betsey coldly and, it seemed to me, contemptuously. However, he appeared concerned enough when he said, "She needs to be put to bed—the train trip was exhausting."

"Yes." Betsey's response was the merest thread of sound. "I would like to be put to bed." Her eyes sought Caleb's. "It's so good to be home," she told him.

Home! The echo of her words reverberated through my mind. I had to clench my teeth against my tongue to still my protest. She was not home. I did not want her there. Incredibly but instinctively, I was afraid of having her there, and not because she was married to the man I loved—*had* loved, I amended purposefully. No, my fears of my sister went deeper and carried with them an amorphous sense of foreboding that eluded any real definition.

An instant later, I had regained my mental

equilibrium, and for the moment, at least, my anxiety was alleviated. I said gently, "Your room is ready, dear. Would you like some broth or a cup of tea?"

"Nothing." Betsey shook her head. "I only want to rest, Clarissa." She looked at me then, for the first time. "You . . . you are too good to me," she half-sobbed, reaching out her hand.

Taking it, I felt all my love for her returning. "Nonsense, Betsey," I said. "We'll soon have you well again. You'll see."

"Did you hear that, Betsey?" Jared remarked. "I told you you might depend on Clarissa. She above all women, knows the real definition of kindness." The speech had been gallant, but I was not deceived—the bitterness of his tone had belied his words, and much to my distress, I felt an uneasy kinship with him. Evidently, obviously, naturally, his marriage with my sister had not quelled his feelings for me, any more than mine with his father had assuaged the passion I had had for him. A gust of wild laughter threatened to escape from me as I thought of the four of us in that room as I might have envisioned it some years ago—but then, I would have stood by Jared's side and the ring I wore on my left hand would have been placed there by him. Much to my relief, the fancy passed with the suddenness of an April cloud, and, freed from that troublesome quartet

of old ghosts, I could maintain my hard-won serenity.

When Caleb carried Betsey to her room, Jared made no attempt to follow and I remained below, too—in answer to an unspoken command from my husband who did not want me climbing stairs so often. Since I did not want to reveal the real reason behind his strictures, I made no protest, but I should have preferred to put off the inevitable confrontation with Jared.

Uncomfortably we looked at each other—I noticed that the bitterness so evident in his voice had etched lines on his face, too. He had grown thinner and, at twenty-eight, he should not have looked so careworn. He said, "Well, Rissa . . ."

I forced a smile, "Well, Jared . . ."

"You look blooming," he continued, his expression, unexpectedly ferocious, startled me. His handsome features were not fashioned for such a scowl. "No," he said in a low voice, "I am not going to make polite conversation." His scowl deepened. "Were there ever two people less alike! I was a fool, a damned stupid fool to imagine I should ever find a trace of you in her—and if you expect me to ask your pardon for my profanity, be damned along with me!"

I looked at him, appalled. "That couldn't be why you . . . you married . . ." I began and stopped as he whirled on me.

"Why I married Betsey? Yes. Could you think there'd be another reason?"

"B-But . . ." I stammered. "Poor Betsey . . ."

"Poor Betsey!" he actually snarled. "You waste your pity, Rissa. If you knew what transpires in the mind of 'poor Betsey,' you . . ." His eyes widened and the words froze on his lips. Striding to my chair, he picked up my discarded knitting, thrusting it at me. "Whose is this?" he asked hoarsely.

"Mine," I said as calmly as I could, wishing I had had the foresight to thrust it beneath the cushions or anywhere out of view.

His face paled and, throwing it down on the couch, he strode from the room.

Not knowing what else to do and needing to do something, I picked up the knitting and began to work on it. Though I didn't even look at it, I added another inch that needed no correction at all from Mrs. Curtis.

Despite her obvious pleasure at being back at Colwell's Crossing, Betsey did not recover her health or spirits immediately. While her attack of grippe was not as serious as the one that had nearly taken her life, it had left her considerably weakened, and Dr. Lamb prescribed bedrest. Because of her condition, she did not share a room with Jared; she stayed in her old chamber in the

east wing, where she was tended by May, Janet, and myself.

Disinclined to read or talk, she lay quietly, sleeping a great part of the day or simply staring into space. Finally, on an afternoon some four days after her arrival, she turned to me, saying, "You haven't scolded me, Rissa."

"Why should I?"

"Why?" she echoed. "I ran away with Jared and I didn't write or . . ."

"We needn't discuss it, Betsey," I told her.

A shade of disappointment passed over her face. "You're not even curious as to why I chose to marry Jared?"

My heart began to beat faster, or so it seemed to me, but I said calmly enough, "Wasn't it because you loved him?"

She laughed. "Do people always marry out of love for one another?" she asked pointedly.

My cheeks burned, but I managed to keep my gaze steady and my voice even. "It's to be hoped they do, when they run away together. Certainly such an action implies both love and trust."

A flash of anger illumined Betsey's eyes. "There was nothing else for me to do," she said resentfully.

"What does that mean?" I asked.

She shook her head, "Nothing, Clarissa." Closing her eyes, she sighed, "I am tired. Would you draw the curtains against the sun, please."

"If you wish." I left her with the sense of much unsaid and my confusion deepening. Why had she married Jared and how could they continue living together when they obviously did not love or even respect each other? Those were troubling thoughts, but there was another thought beneath them that proved even more disturbing—more than a thought. It was a sense of relief, as though a heavy burden had been lifted from my heart, and conversely, in that very moment of lifting, it deposited in its wake another burden, one of shame because I was happy Jared could or did not love my sister. A sentence from a sermon I had recently heard floated to the surface of my mind—it concerned adultery, or rather what our minister had termed, "the adultery of the heart."

I had been uneasy about Jared and Betsey's return to Colwell's Crossing—after a fortnight, I was nearly distracted by their continuing presence in the house, yet nothing had happened overtly. Betsey, upon recovering, started riding again and, with Caleb's permission, she was often allowed to exercise Belcore. Jared occasionally rode with her; more often he closeted himself in the library. I had taken to rising late; I was wretchedly ill in the mornings, and though I might go for hours without seeing either of them, I could not help remembering the sense of impending doom I had experienced the morning of their arrival, and

which I dared not mention to Caleb because he would have termed my fears fragile. Wistfully, I remembered his thought about finding other quarters for them, but it must have slipped his mind. It was not surprising—he was extremely busy. Several of his clients had sustained great losses in the financial crisis and were unable to meet their obligations, while others had profited. Accordingly, there were suits and countersuits, and sometimes he worked far into the night, returning so exhausted that he fell into bed without uttering a word, asleep before his head touched the pillow.

However, one night after dinner, he proved he had not forgotten his promise. We were in the music room, and Betsey, looking particularly fetching in a blue gown Jared had bought for her in New York, was at the piano playing Liszt's *Liebestraum* soulfully if not entirely accurately. Jared, at her side, was turning the pages; he appeared attentive, even enraptured, but the smile hovering at the corners of his mouth was derisive, as if he were saying, "Things are not what they seem in this charming tableau." Caleb, standing by the fire, had an abstracted look in his eyes, but as the music ended, he clapped loudly.

Betsey smiled at him. "What shall I play next, Caleb?" she demanded.

"I should like to hear more of Liszt's music,"

he told her, "but we must talk. I have what I hope will be a nice surprise for you."

"A surprise!" Her eyes gleamed and she clapped her hands, "I love surprises, Caleb. What is it?"

Jared's laugh, edged with mockery, resounded through the room. "If he tells you so quickly, it won't be a surprise any more." He glanced at me. "Now, I," he continued, "am not so fond of surprises."

His attitude angered me. Happy as I was over my expected child, I wanted everyone to rejoice with me, but Jared acted as if it were less blessing than betrayal. He had no right to spoil my pleasure, I thought indignantly. I wished he had not come back.

"The surprise, Caleb?" Betsey slipped from her piano bench and ran to him. "Tell me what it is?" she demanded imperiously.

He put his arm around her. "Your old home has become vacant, Betsey . . ." he began.

"Oakhurst?" I cried joyfully. "That horrid Mrs. Long has left?"

He nodded. "Yes, her husband died and she's gone to stay with a cousin in Lynn. I've bought the place and I'm going to give it to Jared and Betsey as a wedding present."

"Oh." Betsey moved away from him, her smile fading. "We . . . we're to leave Colwell's Crossing?"

Caleb seemed unaware of her reaction. "I thought you'd prefer a home of your own, my dear," he said.

Jared had stiffened. "That's very generous of you, sir," he said softly. "We should prefer a home of our own," his eyes dwelt on me, "where we, too, can increase and multiply."

"No!" Betsey cried. "I want to stay here." She looked piteously at Caleb. "Please, let me stay here!"

Jared glared at her. "You're being a child!" he rasped.

Ignoring him, she turned on me. "Rissa," she pleaded, "don't make me go away!"

"Betsey, dear," I said gently, "Oakhurst isn't far from here. You can visit us whenever you choose."

"Yes, whenever you choose, my dear," Caleb told her.

"No." She gave him a stricken look. "Nooooooo." Turning, she ran from the room.

"Betsey!" Jared yelled, as he hurried after her.

Caleb was the first to break the ensuing silence. Frowning, he said, "It's time she grew up. We've both been too indulgent with her."

Old habits are hard to break and I felt I should beg him to let my sister remain since that was what she wanted so very much, but I could not bring myself to utter the requisite words. I

wanted her to go. I wanted her out of Colwell's Crossing as soon as possible—and Jared with her!

I was very restive that night and when I finally slept, the dream that possessed me was so frightening I could only be relieved when I awakened—but even after I had opened my eyes, it remained in my mind. I had been running, and, behind me, I heard the baying of hounds and the sound of hooves crashing through the dry autumn grasses. My lungs ached and my breath came in agonized pants. Then I fell and the baying grew louder; over it, I could hear men yelling at each other. "They've got her scent!"

"We'll find her soon . . ."

"Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live."

That last phrase, intoned rather than spoken, spelled my doom. I knew that. They would hang me. Fury possessed me. I hated my pursuers, ugly bigots in black garments. I was no witch! The herbs I had grown in my garden had been medicinal but my accusers would not believe that; they had spoken of a pact with Satan. I hated them. If only I were a real witch, if only Satan were my master—then I should have begged him to damn them all!

They broke through the brush—the dogs were on me. I cried, "Curse you, curse the lot of you, curse this ground and may all who dwell on it reap a harvest of sorrow!"

Fully awake now, I shuddered. Why did I dream of the witch? Or had I been dreaming? Was it possible that her uneasy spirit still dwelt at Colwell's Crossing—rising up to possess its inhabitants? As that unwelcome idea crossed my mind, I heard voices beneath my window, angry voices. Opening my eyes, I blinked against the sunshine.

Caleb no longer slept beside me, and judging from the quality of the light, it must be close to nine in the morning. A glance at the clock showed me that it was twenty minutes past the hour. I still heard the voices and now I recognized them. Hurrying to my window, I saw Betsey and my husband—she faced him angrily and he, too, looked angry or disturbed, I was not sure which; but whatever they had been saying, their conversation was at an end, for she ran toward the house while he, deep in thought, walked quickly in the direction of the stables. I could guess what she had been saying and I found I felt more compassionate than the night before. Anticipating her immediate return to her room, I flung a negligee around me and went into the hall—sure enough, she was running up the stairs.

"Betsy!" I called.

She halted mid-step, clutching the balustrade and staring or, rather, glaring up at me. "What do you want?" she inquired sullenly.

I gave her a conciliating smile. "I am so excited about the purchase of Oakhurst, dear. I should

like to go with you to look at it today—shall we?" Before she could respond, I added, "I am sure it cannot have fared well under the ownership of Mrs. Long. Probably it will need considerable repairs before anyone will be able to live in it again. I shouldn't think you'd be able to move in for months."

The wildness died out of her gaze. She gave me a thoughtful look. "Months?" she repeated.

"I should imagine so," I assured her. "I'm afraid it must have been sadly neglected."

"Oh, I hope . . ." she began and then stopped.

"I hope the same, Betsey," I told her gently. "I don't want you to leave us, yet."

She stared at me doubtfully, then her face twisted and, running up the remaining stairs, she enfolded me in the first embrace she had given me in years. "Oh, Clarissa!" she sighed. "You are too good. I wish . . . I wish I could be like you." She moved away from me, adding in a stricken whisper, "But I can't be and no amount of trying will help. We shouldn't have come back, you know—and you shouldn't want us to stay. Oh, why can't I—" She broke off with an odd little laugh. "You don't know what I mean, do you?" she demanded.

Against my will, the name slipped from my lips. "Jared?"

"Jared?" she echoed. Suddenly her expression

changed; she looked enormously relieved. "It's not the answer, Rissa," she said.

"The answer to what?"

"To the enigma, but enough of conundrums—when may we go to Oakhurst? This morning?"

"It would be easier if we went after lunch," I said.

"Very good." She started toward her room and then stopped. "I hope we may be alone. I mean the two of us, only?"

"Of course," I assented. "I shouldn't want it to be any other way."

From Colwell's Crossing to Oakhurst was less than two miles, but as we sat in the carriage, I felt we were traveling back in time as well as distance and it was as the child Clarissa Lovell that I clung to the strap, my face pressed against the window, eagerly anticipating every landmark along the way. So I had sat years ago, coming home from school with my parents—but then Betsey would have been at Oakhurst in the nursery. That she shared some of my nostalgia was apparent when she said wistfully, "I wish we might find them waiting for us."

"It would be lovely," I sighed.

Betsey's face lighted. "Do you know, Rissa, I've not visited their graves in such a long time. Have you?" As I shook my head, she added, "I should like to go there now. May we? It's not far."

I hesitated. Unlike many of the people I knew, I did not pay regular visits to the graveyards. I could not believe that the souls of my parents lingered beneath their dark red tombstones in the Lovell plot. I envisioned them both far, far away on some distant star, but with Betsey's eager eyes on my face, I could not refuse her. "Very well, we'll go," I said resignedly.

Rather than being at the back at St. John's Episcopal Church, our plot was located in a graveyard midway between Oakhurst and Colwell's Crossing on a high hill ringed round with trees, which on this early March day had not yet begun to bud. In the chill sunlight, they looked singularly stark against the sky, heightening the sense of depression I always felt whenever I passed a cemetery. However, I could be glad that most of the snow had melted, for my shoes were thin and I did not want to catch cold.

William stopped the carriage within yards of the gate and Betsey hurried inside. I followed slowly, feeling a trifle guilty as I saw cut flowers wilting beneath many of the headstones. I had planted a rosebush between my parents' grave but it was not in bloom; I felt I should have liked to bring them some blossoms, but then I recalled Mama's oft-repeated remark, "Bring me your roses while ye may." She had not approved of visiting cemeteries either.

The Lovell plot was large; in addition to the

numerous tombstones, it also boasted a small stone chapel built by Moses Elijah Lovell, the founder of our family. He, his wife, and three of his twelve children reposed beneath its floor, but it had not been used by any of his descendants, and in the century since it had been erected, it had become so covered with vines that it was almost impossible to see its parent stone—only the oaken door remained free of their encroaching tendrils.

"Oh, look," Betsey pointed, as I joined her. "I believe it's open. The chapel door, I mean." Leaving me, she darted to it and gave it a tentative push. It yielded immediately. "Come and look, Clarissa," she invited as she slipped inside.

I followed her into a small square room, furnished with two dusty pews and a broken lecturn. Cobwebs crowded the corners of the ceiling and dust lay thick on the floor.

"Think how angry Moses Elijah would have been at all this neglect," Betsey said. "I wonder what he was like?"

"He founded the family—the Massachusetts branch," I said.

"That tells me nothing about his character," she returned, "except that he must have been very proud—imagine, a chapel! I wonder if Caleb will build one."

"Don't talk about such things!" I exclaimed.

She turned on me. "But Caleb's not young, Clarissa, and one day he'll be dust."

"Don't!" I cried.

She looked at me quizzically. "Spoken like a dutiful wife, Clarissa. Are you dutiful, though? I'm not. I am not in the least dutiful to Jared nor he to me ..." Her voice trembled. "Rissa, Mama said I should be happy when I grew up and married ... she said I should live happily ever after like a princess in a fairy tale."

A vivid image of Mama flickered before my eyes. "She wanted to believe you would—she wanted to believe we both would because she herself was so happy."

"And look at us," Betsey said dolefully. She ran out of the chapel and stood between the two headstones marking the graves of our parents, putting her hands on either. As I came up to her, I heard her murmur, "I should have gone with you." She turned to me, "You ought to have let me stay with them, you know. I wish you had, Rissa."

An unpleasant thrill went through me as I recalled the day I had knelt by Betsey's bed and made my bargain with God, or had it been with God? What power had I summoned? Common sense came to my rescue. I said, "Dear, I had nothing to do with your living or your dying."

"But you did, Rissa," she insisted, staring at me. "You called and I came back ... I've never told you this before, but I saw you kneeling at my

bed . . . I saw my body, too, lying there—but I wasn't there . . . I was with Mama and Papa . . . they said I must go back to you and so I came . . .” Her voice hardened. “And then you . . .” she paused. “Oh, I am talking nonsense, aren't I? Come, let's get on to Oakhurst.”

Betsey hurried back to the carriage and when I joined her, I found her odd mood had evaporated. Though I was relieved, I could not entirely shake the sense of unease it had engendered in my own mind. During the rest of the drive to Oakhurst, she was the one who looked out of the window. I sat quietly in my corner and though I longed to banish the thought, I could not help wondering if I had not done her a great disservice in recalling her to life.

My telling Betsey that Oakhurst would require extensive repairs had been mainly a way of assuaging her fear of imminent departure from Colwell's Crossing. However, when at last we went through the house, I was horrified to discover that it was badly in need of renovation. The wainscoting in the hall and in the library was badly scratched; from the look of them, the banisters had never been polished, and fieldmice had gnawed the baseboards. Betsey discovered a bird's nest in the master bedroom, and though she was as distressed as I over the condition of our old home, she came out of that chamber with an

obviously relieved expression. Nor was there any regret in her tone as she observed, "It will take months to make it habitable!"

"Months," I agreed.

"In fact . . ." her teeth clicked together, biting off her sentence.

"In fact?" I pursued.

"I forgot what I was about to say," she told me. She added, "I wonder how the old nursery looks after all these years?"

"Let's see," I said.

Much to our surprise, the room was largely unchanged from the days when we had studied and played in it. Our chest of toys was gone, but our desks remained and on the windowseat there was still the faded pad where one or another of us would sit to recite our lessons while wistfully gazing down into the garden below.

"Oh, look." Betsey stared up at the trapdoor with its ladder. "Do you suppose he's still there?"

"Who?" I demanded, startled.

"The . . . bogeyman . . . the evil bogeyman." She grabbed at the ladder and pulled it down. "I think I shall visit him."

"Don't," I protested. "You'll fall."

"No, I shan't," she returned, scrambling up the ladder and pushing against the door. It opened easily. "I'm going inside!" she exclaimed. "Why don't you come, too?"

"No." I watched her anxiously as she disappeared into the attic.

"Ugh!" she exclaimed. "Oh, it's so dusty and dirty—and so many old papers and boxes around. I could believe a bogeyman lived up here."

I sneezed, "Oh, Betsey, do come down—the dust is getting all over everything." Hastily, I backed out of the nursery and then, prompted by memory, I looked into the stairwell.

It was filled with shadows and framed in the funnel of staircases, I seemed to see the small slender form of the boy Jared. Then, even as I looked, he was there, barely discernible in the dimness but no phantom either, as he called, "Betsey, Clarissa! Where are you?"

There was a flurry of silks back of me and then Betsey joined me, looking down and saying in an annoyed whisper, "Jared. What's he doing here?"

"Helloa!" he shouted. "I know you're here."

"We're up here!" I acknowledged.

"What can he want?" Betsey muttered.

I did not answer her. I was already halfway down the stairs. There had been a note in his voice I had not heard for a long time, a youthful enthusiasm that piqued my curiosity.

We met on the second landing and I found his expression matched his voice—his eyes were sparkling and he was looking around him with delight. "It's perfect!" he said almost reverently. "Quite perfect."

"Perfect?" I questioned.

"Father had agreed to let me do it—and you're to help," he said obscurely.

"Do what? Help how?"

"We are going to renovate Oakhurst, my dear. We can turn it into a real showplace."

"A showplace . . . ?" Betsey had joined us. "But it's fallen into ruin. It's not habitable!"

"Nonsense!" he snapped. "The damage you see is only on the surface. Scratches can be covered, wood revarnished, holes filled in. The basic structure of this house was built to last. The possibilities are endless. In the downstairs hall I could add a conservatory . . ."

"A conservatory?" I echoed. "But what a lovely idea. Could it be done without injuring the design?"

"We'll change the design," he told me. "The shape of this house could lead itself to many innovations. I have ideas I should like to try . . . ideas I have long wanted to incorporate into an American house . . ."

As he spoke, he seemed entirely different from the sulky young man who had been moping in the library for the past month. He looked younger, more like the boy I had known before he went to Rome. I clapped my hands. "Oh," I said. "The way you speak! It's as though you're breathing life into the house."

"I shall breathe life into it," he said.

Betsey's laugh was brittle and quelling. "A house is wood and stone. It doesn't breathe."

Jared shrugged, "We'll see what you say when I'm through," he told her.

I had been afraid that Jared's enthusiasm would subside as suddenly as it had arisen, but it did not. Instead, he closeted himself in the library and drew plans that Robert Bronsen, a builder Caleb brought, approved enthusiastically, pronouncing them practical as well as innovative. With Bronsen's acceptance, Caleb's own enthusiasm for the project increased, and for the first time since I had known them a real rapport existed between father and son.

I shall not say that I did not have some regrets for an understanding that had come too late for Jared and myself, but these were quickly swallowed up in the excitement of restoring Oakhurst, for as he had promised, I was to help him. I would choose the color schemes for the rooms and oversee the furnishing.

At first, I tried to interest Betsey in the planning of the rooms. I showed her various colors and demanded her preferences in wall-hangings, but her answer to all my suggestions was invariably, "Oh, Clarissa, please, you do it. You've had so much more experience than I." If I had thought about it more deeply, I would have insisted upon her cooperation, but faced with the

prospect of redecorating and beautifying my old home, I dismissed my sister and her difficult moods from my mind, concentrating on the work at hand.

The project interested everyone we knew and many we did not know. Though Jared himself had been largely an unknown quantity in the community, his mother's divorce, his foreign marriage, the death of his wife, and his elopement with Betsey were common knowledge. People were also aware of his un-American distaste for business, his involvement in the arts, and his financial failure, facts which had caused friends to view him with some suspicion—even antipathy. However, Robert Bronsen, a man with many acquaintances, did not scruple to confide his enthusiasm over Jared's plans for Oakhurst, and, as work began in earnest, more than one carriage appeared on the site with drivers murmuring about a "mistake in direction"; others deigned to offer excuses, they just came and, of course, what everyone hoped to see was what Jared termed "*le jardin d'hiver*," I, "the winter garden," and everyone else "the glass house." Even though it was still only on the drawing board, the whole community seemed to know about it, and by the time the story had circulated through the neighborhood, people believed that the Oakhurst addition would be the size and circumference of its ancestor, the Crystal Palace.

Jared had completed his drawings for the winter garden in the latter part of March. From what I understood, the structure would be made of iron and glass—the parts to be prefabricated and then assembled on the site. Meanwhile, the lower hall would be enlarged and a passageway formed to lead into the garden. Though it seemed like a complicated process, Bronsen and Jared assured me that it could be completed in less than three months. This intelligence was also shared with the community, and toward the middle of May, people were beginning to make daily pilgrimages to Oakhurst. They came bringing picnic lunches and some had the audacity to enter the house. Jared bore with this incursion exactly two days and then stationed guards around Oakhurst with orders to turn away all trespassers. Then, with much the same attitude as the sculptor who jealously hides his creation until the moment of unveiling, he forbade us all to visit the house until the project was completed.

I must confess that I was disappointed, but neither his father nor his wife objected. Caleb was too busy with his work, but Betsey expressed the opinion that the structure of the house was too infirm to support the addition of an iron building. "It's too old. It will fall down, you'll see," she insisted.

It was a prediction she voiced often during the following weeks, and finally, I said impatiently,

"Do you really believe that, Betsey? Or do you want it to fall down?"

We were upstairs in the sewing room, and Betsey, who had been mending her green velvet riding habit, did not answer me immediately. Breaking the thread and releasing her needle, she thrust it into a pincushion before saying, "Mama and Papa died there, Clarissa."

"People always die in houses, but they live in them, too and are happy. Weren't we happy there?"

She kept her eyes on her skirt. "I am happier here." She looked at me then and the expression in her blue eyes was woeful. "Oh, Clarissa, don't send me away, please. I don't want to leave Colwell's Crossing."

Her direct appeal made me feel uncomfortable—guilty, too. For since Jared and I had commenced working together, my attitude toward him had changed. Rather than attraction, I felt affection and I am sure that he, too, experienced something of a similar nature, for the tension between us had lessened—and for the first time, we were really friends, a fact which, ironically enough, removed the reason that for me had made the renovation of Oakhurst imperative. However, the work was in progress and inevitably, it would be concluded and Betsey would have no alternative but to move there. In the interests of comforting her, I said, "My dear, I know that you and

Jared have had your difficulties but perhaps it's because you've never been settled. You lived in a hotel in New York and now—with us. Once you are in your own home, you'll find your life has more purpose, more meaning. That's the way it's been for me."

"Clarissa," Betsey had spoken in a low voice but with such intensity that the effect was the same as a shriek. Flinging down her skirt, she stepped swiftly to my side, "I am not *you* nor any part of *you*. I have my own needs, my own desires—they do not center about nor can they be appeased by a *house!*" Whirling away from me, she sped from the room, slamming the door behind her.

Mechanically, I picked up her green velvet skirt. The material clung to my hand; there was electricity in it and seemingly in the air around me. The outburst had shocked me. I had seen Betsey childishly fretful and petulant, but this time there had been nothing childish in the venom that had coated her tones. It had been a woman who had confronted me, a woman filled with a hatred and an agony, I could not comprehend.

Fortunately for my peace of mind, Betsey's mood abruptly changed, and if she kept out of my way more than formerly, she did not exhibit any more of that troubling animosity; gradually the scene in the sewing room faded from my mind. I

really did not have much time for soul searching. It was a warm June and the patients in the hospital where I worked as a volunteer were dreadfully uncomfortable. In spite of objections from Caleb, I spent a good deal of time fanning them and reading to them. There were also picnics and games to organize for the poor children of the community, there was my work at Sunday school, and there were various committee meetings. Naturally, much of the conversation at these gatherings centered around the alterations of Oakhurst, but when asked, I could only quote Jared and say, "You will see it when it's finished."

I was beginning to think that it would never be finished, but on an afternoon in early July, Caleb, Betsey, and I went to Oakhurst. It was a particularly beautiful day, warm but not unbearably so—the sky was a vivid blue and the trees had never looked so green; the fields were full of wildflowers and every garden we passed was brilliant with roses and hydrangeas—all the bounty of summer.

Jared had instructed William to drive around the back of the house—and then we saw it. I was sitting close to Caleb and I felt him catch his breath at the same time Betsey gasped, "Oh!"

I shared their awe. Even in pen and ink, the conception had been startling; translated into glass and iron, it was incredibly exciting. Viewed from a distance, it caught and mirrored the sun-

light blindingly. Octagonal in shape, it was a little over two stories high. Though its basic structure was iron, it was incredibly delicate and airy in appearance—it reminded me of a giant soap bubble and I had the impression that, in common with a soap bubble, it might start from its moorings and float away.

Moments later, we found it to be equally impressive inside. Betsey best expressed it when she said breathlessly, "It brings the sky so close." Running to Jared, she threw her arms around him. "I'm proud of you. It's my favorite room in the whole world!"

Jared embraced her. "Are you?" he smiled. "I am glad it's captured your fancy, my love. I hope you'll help me decorate it."

"Decorate it?" she questioned. "But there's decoration enough with the sky and the sun, and think how it will look by moonlight."

"A garden needs plants," Jared said. "Vines and tropical flowers and a fountain. Some have already been ordered, but you must choose the rest."

"Already?" Her eyes were wide with alarm. "You'll . . . you'll not be finished so soon, will you?" she demanded.

"Another month and the house will be ready for us," he answered.

"And," Caleb put an arm around Betsey, "we shall give a great ball to celebrate!"

She moved against him, "But . . ." she began, then, suddenly, she clapped her hands. "A great ball?" she echoed. "That will be exciting. I do love to dance!"

It was only when I expelled it in a long sigh that I realized I had been holding my breath. I had also gripped the handle of my bag so tightly that the metal chain had bitten into my palm. I was conscious of the lessening of a tension I did not quite understand, but then I met Jared's eyes and saw the anger in them and, at the same time, the brightness of the room seemed to diminish. Yet, when I looked at the sky, I found it unclouded and the sun as brilliant as ever. Suddenly, I was abysmally frightened, for I knew I had had a premonition of impending disaster, but I had no notion when or where it would strike. I knew only that in some way it involved my sister—no, more than that, I was sure it involved us all!

Prompted by my fears I meant to keep an eye on Betsey, but as Oakhurst was no longer closed to me, I became so caught up in my part of the remodeling that I did not have the time to think about her. Every day that I could, I went to the house to watch the plasterers at work on the ceilings and the new paper being hung. I was not the only visitor. Since Jared had ceased to protest, we were constantly being invaded by curious onlookers—some came from as far as Boston and all

were unanimous in their praise for the innovative winter garden.

More important than mere praise, Jared was getting orders. In the fortnight following its installation, he had received commissions from a wealthy railroad magnate and a banker for similar additions to their houses. A third man, a newly rich textile manufacturer, wanted Jared to build him a villa.

Everyone we knew was delighted by Jared's success. He was invited out a great deal but he refused most invitations, his excuse being that he was too busy. Actually, his problem was Betsey. On the few occasions she accompanied him, she had been listless and withdrawn, and the sight of her pale face and empty eyes was enough to cast a damper on the liveliest gathering. It did not help to remonstrate with her. She did not listen.

"I do not know what can be the matter with the girl," Caleb said to me one morning. "You'd think life would please her now—but she acts as if a grave calamity had befallen her. From her demeanor, it could be assumed that my son beats her every day before breakfast."

It was on the tip of my tongue to tell him that a good beating was probably what she needed, but I restrained myself and said only, "You know she's always been prone to moods."

"This one," he returned sharply, "has lasted too long. I am quite out of patience with her."

"Perhaps you should talk to her," I said.

"I think I will," he nodded. "I shall tell her that this attitude of hers is going to hurt Jared's career."

I saw Caleb when he approached Betsey and asked her into the library. As she followed him, I caught an odd gleam in her eye. I read defiance in it and something else, I was at a loss to define. She was closeted with him for a long time, but when I asked Caleb what had passed between them, he said, "It was of no importance, my dear. I think Betsey might need a spring tonic." He laughed, but I did not like his expression. It seemed to me that he was looking very grave.

I was to meet Jared at Oakhurst that afternoon and when I came downstairs, I found Betsey in the hall, dressed for riding. For once, she was in excellent spirits; her eyes were bright and she smiled gaily at me. "Good afternoon, Rissa dear. Might I accompany you to Oakhurst? I should like to see what progress has been made!"

I was surprised and relieved. Obviously her talk with Caleb had been of some benefit. "I should be delighted!" I said.

"Good. I'll saddle Belcore."

"Aren't you coming with me in the carriage?" I demanded.

She shook her head. "I'll be your outrider . . . it's a lovely afternoon for August . . ."

"Lovely?" I echoed. "There's quite a wind blowing."

"I love to ride in the wind," she told me. "You ought to try it, Clarissa. It's very exhilarating—but I suppose you couldn't know. Imagine—in three more months, I shall be an aunt. It's odd how old that makes me feel!"

"It shouldn't." I laughed, thinking that this was the longest speech I had heard from her in months. "I've known people with three-year-old aunts."

"I suppose . . ." She stepped closer to me. "You're not afraid. Are you?"

"Afraid?" I repeated.

She shivered slightly, "To have a child, I mean. I should be terrified." She ran her hands over her slim hips.

"You'll change your mind when it happens to you," I said. "It's the most natural thing in the world and the most beautiful."

"Natural . . . beautiful?" Betsey's lip curled. "To grow heavy and move so slowly—the way you do now?"

"It's not for long—only nine months."

"Only . . ." she echoed. "It's a lifetime—but I do not know why I should talk of such things, now. You'll be late for your appointment with Jared. My husband does not like to be kept waiting."

"I am sure he will not mind when he finds you're coming with me," I said.

Her laughter echoed through the hall, "Oh, Rissa, Rissa!" she exclaimed. "Don't you know that he only cares about you? Oakhurst is his love-letter to you!"

"Nonsense!" I retorted. "All that is over and done with. We are friends and nothing more." I moved toward the door.

She followed me. "Do not be angry with me, Clarissa," she begged. "You shouldn't be angry, you know. It should be flattering to know that there is someone hopelessly in love with you. And it serves him right, does it not? Think of all the suffering you've endured on his account."

"That's in the past, Betsey," I said impatiently.

"Are you so sure, Rissa?" she questioned. "Haven't you ever wished you might share the glass house with Jared?"

I stared at her—at last, I thought, I understood the reason for her peculiar moods. Of course. She was jealous. "Oh, Betsey," I said, "*you* will share the glass house and all Oakhurst with Jared—anything between us is over and done with. Come, you'll see how happy he'll be to greet you!"

She moved closer to me. "Have you no feelings left for Jared, none at all?"

"I am fond of him—we are friends," I said. "That is all."

"Do you love Caleb, then?" she asked.

Her question startled me, but my answer startled me even more, for I was able to say, "Yes, I love him very much."

Her eyes widened. "I think you do," she whispered.

"Yes," I cried almost triumphantly, aware of a feeling of deep happiness and contentment. "I do! I do!"

She laughed then and ran outside. Over her shoulder she called, "Race you to Oakhurst, then!"

I was glad that Betsey was not riding with me in the carriage. I needed to think about the truth that emerged from our conversation. I did not know when it had occurred but, as I had told her, I loved Caleb. It was not the passion I had felt for Jared. It was deeper, more satisfying—compound-ed of his kindness to me and to my sister, based on his strength, his intelligence, and possibly on just being with him day after day. It . . . I decided not to analyze it any more. It existed; that was all that mattered and I could wish the carriage were not headed toward Oakhurst and Jared. I would rather have been going to Caleb to tell him about my wonderful discovery—to tell him that I loved him!

Betsey arrived at Oakhurst less than two minutes before I did. She was dismounting from Belcore just as William helped me from the car-

riage. I noted that she looked particularly well; the ride had put color into her pale cheeks and her eyes were sparkling. Leading the horse toward us, she exclaimed, "Oh, that was lovely! I could have ridden forever!"

I moved quickly out of range of the giant horse, who snorted and plunged, rolled his eyes wildly. "Do tether him somewhere," I begged.

She laughed. "You're really afraid of Belcore, aren't you, Rissa? But he's a lamb." She placed her hand on his nose, patting it gently. "And he knows me. Belcore's my friend because he knows I do not fear him." She kissed the dark muzzle. "But I'll take him out of your way, Rissa. I shouldn't want you to show him you're afraid. That would make him angry."

As I watched her draw the stallion away, I wished that Caleb had never bought him. There was something evil about him, yet even as that thought crossed my mind, I laughed it away; Belcore was neither evil nor good—those were human qualities and he was a beast.

We found Jared in the winter garden with Mr. Bronsen and a tall, slim young woman in black. As we drew nearer, I saw that she was wearing a mourning ring. I also noticed that her hair and her eyes were almost as dark as her sable garments—obviously, she was a widow, but her expression did not denote deep grief. On the contrary, her eyes were full of laughter and her

mouth was curved in a provocative smile. There was a lilt to her voice as she said, "I understand about your other orders, Mr. Colwell, but I am able to wait."

Jared smiled back at her. He had opened his mouth to reply, but whatever he would have said died in his throat as Betsey came up to him and put her hand possessively on his arm. "You see that I have come!" she announced. "And here is Clarissa, too."

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Colwell," Mr. Bronsen said. He looked at us. "The two Mrs. Colwells. And might I present Mrs. Clare?"

The girl in black nodded, and I noted with some little regret that the gleam had faded from her eyes and the smile from her mouth. Looking at Betsey, she said, "I am happy to meet you, Mrs. Colwell." There was a certain question in her expression as she turned to me. "And you also are Mrs. Colwell?"

Betsey laughed. "You mustn't be thinking my husband's a Mormon, Mrs. Clare. My sister is married to his father."

"I see," Mrs. Clare murmured. "I have been admiring your husband's work, Mrs. Colwell." She smiled briefly at Jared. "It's a lovely addition. How fortunate you are in the location, too—those wonderful trees! My late husband was a collector of paintings. He preferred landscapes but there

has never been a painting to equal the view from here."

"Yes," Betsey acknowledged, "it is indeed a lovely view. I have told Jared he should not mar it by planting vines and flowers inside, but he does not agree."

"But you will not sacrifice the view," Mrs. Clare told her. "And you will have a little bit of summer all the year. Why, the very name of winter garden sounds enchanting to me."

"To all of us, Mrs. Clare," Mr. Bronsen said. "How well it will look against the snows—you could believe yourself in southern climes."

"Exactly." Mrs. Clare nodded. "I am already impatient for you to begin work on my house." She smiled at us. "So pleasant to have met you." In a flurry of farewells she and Mr. Bronsen were gone.

"What an attractive woman!" I exclaimed. "She's young to be a widow."

"I'm told her husband was many years her senior," Jared explained.

"How did he die?" Betsey inquired.

He shook his head, "I know very little about her save that she is a woman of ideas. It will be exhilarating to work with her on the plans for her house. She . . ."

"Oh, do not talk to me any more of houses!" Betsey stamped her foot. "I vow I am bored with the subject. I would we might all live in caravans

as the Gypsies do. I should really like to be a Gypsy—like Balfe's Bohemian Girl, traveling from place to place, singing for a living!"

"Stealing, you mean. Very romantic!" Jared remarked dryly. Before she could answer, he had pointed to a bulky bundle across the room, "The fountain and the tiles are under that canvas. Let me show them to you."

"To Clarissa and not to me?" Betsey glared at him.

"To both of you," Jared returned. "I did not make any distinctions."

"You looked at her and not at me," Betsey accused. "You always do. I might as well not be here." She moved into the passage that led to the hall. "Very well, I shall do you the favor of leaving you alone."

"Betsey!" I exclaimed. "Please, Jared did not mean——"

"You need not explain me to my wife," Jared snapped. "She's well aware that she's talking pure nonsense!"

"But . . ." I protested.

"Let her be!" he said sharply.

I heard Betsey's footsteps on the stairs. Probably she was going up to the old nursery to cry—I felt very sorry for her and equally sorry for Jared. The happiness that had so recently come to me with the discovery that I loved my husband was such that I wanted those whom I loved to have a

similar awakening, but I could see nothing of a like nature for them. Betsey was to be childish. She did not need a young husband too impatient to put up with her vagaries, she needed an older man, a protector. Jared should have had someone like . . . Mrs. Clare.

"Over here, Clarissa," Jared said, pulling off the enshrouding canvas from the fountain. "Meet a daughter of Neptune."

"Oh, Jared," I breathed. "How lovely!" She was one of the most beautiful bronze sculptures I had ever seen. On a base of shells and sea-creatures, she knelt, a slender mermaid, her fishtail wrapped about her, her delicate little face turned up, while in her hands she proffered a conch shell from which, Jared explained, a stream of water would pour into a marble basin. The tiles were blue and white and painted with a floral design, which, when put together, would be part of a larger pattern. Jared and I had already decided on the floor plan. Some of the tiles would be arranged in a kind of court centered by the fountain, itself directly under the dome of the structure. The other tiles would form a deep border along each side of the octagon so that there would be room for a bower of exotic greenery between the furniture we'd planned to install.

After I had duly admired the fountain and the tiles, I was reminded of an earlier conversation

with Caleb. I had nearly forgotten about it and I did need to warn Jared.

"Your father," I said tentatively, "has a surprise for you."

"A surprise?" he demanded. "From your expression, it doesn't seem to be a very pleasant one."

"I want you to know that I didn't hear about it until late last night," I said.

"You're sounding a trifle apologetic, Clarissa," he frowned. "But tell me and have done."

"You needn't look so apprehensive," I laughed. "It's not a bad surprise, it's just a change. He's very proud of your work, you know."

"Clarissa," Jared sighed, "*what* is the surprise?"

"Well, he's gone to great pains and great expense and ordered a complete set of Belter furniture for this room."

"Belter furniture!" Jared grimaced. "But . . ."

"I know," I said quickly. "I know you think it's too ornate, but you mustn't tell him that. He'd be dreadfully disappointed and since you're on such good terms with him and . . ."

"Say no more," he laughed. "I'll admit that I wanted the Morris look but the Belter will lend a touch of drama to this room." He smiled at me fondly. "There. Are all your fears at rest?"

"Quite," I assured him. "Do you know what I should like? I don't think it would be out of keeping here, either."

"You're sounding apologetic again, Clarissa," he observed. "What pet device do you wish to provide. I will not, I warn you, tolerate any macramé lambrequins, even if fashioned by your delicate fingers."

"Macramé lambrequins," I exclaimed. "I hate any sort of lambrequin, as you know. No, I was thinking of our old Bechstein. Since Betsey plays so beautifully, don't you think we could put it in here? It would be lovely in the alcove opposite the entrance."

"No," he protested. "Belter, I shall tolerate for Father's sake, but not Bechstein! Have you any idea what the dampness would do to your piano?"

"Oh," I sighed. "I hadn't thought of that. But still there might be some manner of music here. It would be a lovely place for a chamber concert. Do you remember our sessions in the old days? Papa's violin, Mama at the piano, and . . ." I paused. As I had mentioned Mama, I had felt her with me, but it was a comfortable presence—the sensation was one of alarm and unease, while in my head I seemed to hear her say, "*Child, take care.*"

"*Take care of what—what will happen?*" I asked her silently.

"Clarissa!" the communion or communication, if that's what it had been, was dispelled by Jared's voice. "Do you feel ill? You've turned so pale!"

"Ill?" I answered reluctantly, longing to shut

him out, but it was too late. The presence had gone. "No, I . . . I'm not ill. I felt Mama with me just now. It was as if she had come into the room."

He put his arm around me, "My dear," he said, "surely you must know there are no ghosts? They're nothing more than reactivated memories. You're so sensible, you must realize that."

Was that being sensible? I could not help thinking of that night long ago, when kneeling by Betsey's side, I had called on her fleeing spirit and it had returned. Or had it? The Betsey I had known and the Betsey I now knew seemed like two different people. A little tremor of fear shook me. What had happened to her while she hovered between life and death? Had she strayed too far over that fatal threshold and left some of the essence that was Betsey behind? I banished that assumption quickly. It was too frightening to contemplate, and with as much conviction as I could summon, I said, "Yes, I am sure it was only my imagination."

He smiled at me. "I wish your mother might be with us. She loved gardens and all growing things."

I appreciated his delicate reference and smiled at him mistily. "Even if I may not believe in ghosts, I cannot think that Mama remains entirely unaware of her grandchild."

"I cannot believe it, either," he said conciliatingly. Turning away from me, he moved to the

shelf where he kept his plans and, taking one down, he unrolled it. "Look at this, Clarissa . . . I've made some changes here. I think it would be more practical if we . . ."

"Wait!" I laughed. "I don't see where 'here' is on the plan. You know I have difficulty reading them."

He pointed. "Here," he said.

"And here will be up there?" Looking up, I started to indicate a part of the dome and then I froze—the overhanging roof was a solid mass of flame, which in a matter of minutes must fall and crush us where we stood.

Jared had followed my eyes, and even before I could scream, he had thrust open the door and pulled me clear of the house. As I stumbled outside, I blinked against acrid smoke and looking up saw great gusts of wind-fanned flames leaping skyward. It seemed as if the roof were shifting under their furious onslaught.

"Betsey!" Jared yelled. "Betsey's inside!" He rushed back toward the winter garden, but at that moment a segment of roof crashed down on the glass dome with a terrible shattering noise. "Clarissa . . . William . . . get help . . ." Jared yelled, running toward the front of the house.

I ran back to the carriage but William was not there. "Oh, God," I cried. "William . . . where . . ." Then I heard my name shouted.

"Mrs. Colwell!" William, carrying a sack of

oats, was hurrying toward me from the direction of the barn.

"William!" I sobbed. "Come with me . . . we've got to get Betsey . . . she . . . she's in the house."

"No, she's not, Mrs. Coldwell!" he exclaimed. "Just before I went for the oats, I saw her ride away. She's not in there."

"Not in there!" I looked at him blankly and then I ran toward the house.

He was at my side. "Mrs. Colwell, wait!"

I did not heed him. I rushed up on the porch. The front door stood open and already the hall was dim with smoke. I dashed to the foot of the stairs, "Jared!" I shrieked. "Jared, Jared! Jared!!" Smoke filled my throat and I began to cough helplessly, but still I screamed, "Jared! Come back. She's not there!"

William grabbed me by the shoulders, "Mrs. Colwell, you must get out of here!"

Shaking myself free of him, I clung to the banisters, "Jared, she's gone!" I looked at William. "He . . . he went after Betsey!" I sobbed.

"Please, ma'am," William clutched me purposefully. "Come out now!"

"Clarissa!" My name was called furiously. "Get out!"

Through streaming eyes, I glanced up the stairwell into smoke and flame and saw Jared running down. Relief surged through me and once again I

broke from William to confront Jared as he reached us.

"She's . . ." I paused, looking at his reddened face and singed coat. "You . . . you're hurt."

"Not badly. I couldn't reach her. The whole third floor . . ." As he spoke there was a mighty crash overhead and a shower of sparks fell about us in the hall.

"You've got to get out!" William yelled, pushing us both toward the door.

Once outside, I collapsed into helpless coughing but William was able to tell Jared that Betsey had gone and scarcely had the words left his lips than we heard the clanging of firebells.

"They've been alerted!" I cried joyfully. "Do you think they can save . . ." But even as I posed the question, the fire gleamed red through the windows of the house and through the open door, I saw tongues of flame greedily licking the stairs.

Jared and William begged me to go home, but I would not—I could not leave. In mute agony, I watched as the firemen tried to battle the blaze, but their hoses were rendered ineffectual by the high winds which turned the water into spray, and meanwhile the conflagration spread rapidly, great sections of walls buckling under it until the entire house was sheathed in flame! Finally, it was all over and Oakhurst, which had stood on that site for nearly a hundred years, burned to the ground in less than four hours.

I was ill the next day, and Dr. Lamb insisted I remain in bed. Actually I lacked the will to rise. I felt that a part of me had gone with my old home. "How did it happen?" I sobbed over and over again to Caleb, who sat by my bed much of the day. "No one was in the house except us . . . the workmen had gone home. How did it happen to catch fire?"

He had no answers for me. In fact, he refused to discuss the disaster. I did not see Jared at all. He was in his own room being treated for burns which proved less serious than painful. Thus, it was not until the following day that I learned that Betsey was missing. Since William had watched her ride away, no one had seen her.

Her disappearance had the effect of diminishing the tragedy of Oakhurst, as we anxiously waited for news of her. The sheriff and his men had recruited a host of volunteers to scour the adjacent woods and fields but they had no success. Nor had anyone else seen a blond girl mounted on a great black horse. Seemingly Betsey had ridden into nowhere.

The following three days were filled with agonized speculation as to what might have happened to my sister. There were moments when I pictured her broken body lying in some gully. I even turned on Caleb. "Why did you let her ride that terrible horse?" I demanded. "I begged you to get rid of him. I begged you to——"

"Clarissa," he interrupted. "I let her ride Belcore because she manages him beautifully, even better than I."

"If he saw the fire . . . if he panicked?"

"But William told you they rode away *before* the fire," Caleb emphasized.

"Then . . . why haven't they returned? Oh, God, I am so afraid. She could have met with some terrible accident. She . . . she could be dead.

"You mustn't anticipate the worst, my dear."

"But if she isn't hurt or . . . or . . . she would have come back by now. Something happened. Something had to happen." I wept.

"I don't believe——" Caleb began.

"What do you believe?" I interrupted.

He looked at me with a curious closed expression. "I am not sure."

"You're holding something back from me!" I accused. "What do you know that you've not told me?"

"Nothing, my dear," he assured me. "I know nothing more than you about Betsey's whereabouts."

"But still . . . there's something . . . you get an odd look in your eyes."

"Odd?" he questioned. "You're imagining things, Clarissa."

"I . . ."

"Father?" Jared came into the room. "Could I see you in the library for a moment?"

"Certainly." Caleb gave me a brief smile. "Pray excuse me, my dear."

"Jared," I cried. "Have you learned anything about Betsey?"

His gaze flickered away from mine. "Nothing, Clarissa," he said as he went back into the hall.

They left me feeling frustrated and suspicious. Mentally I reviewed my conversation with Caleb, and again I emerged with the definite feeling of something unsaid. Clearly Caleb had an opinion about the reason for her disappearance. But if she were not hurt, what had happened? Where had she gone and why? What did Caleb really think . . . what did I really think? Why had she left the house so quickly? Had she been frightened . . . of the fire? But if she had been, why hadn't she alerted Jared and myself to the danger? It was then that I thought I knew what had been troubling Caleb? The fire had started on the third floor or possibly in the attic. Betsey had gone upstairs—probably to the third floor nursery. Had she accidentally caused the blaze herself—with a dropped candle. But if she had, wouldn't she have told us? Not if she were panic-stricken, and now—could she not be frightened, terribly frightened by the devastation she had unwittingly caused? Armed with these ideas, I went to the library, but when I entered it, I found it empty. Mrs. Curtis told me that Jared and Caleb had driven away in the carriage.

They did not return until late that night. The following morning, Caleb told me that two different people, miles apart, had told of seeing a girl in green mounted on a huge black horse. Neither, it turned out, had really seen Betsey. I told him my own theories then and he listened attentively.

"Possibly you might be right, Clarissa."

"I think I am," I sighed. "If I could only find her and tell her . . ."

"Perhaps she'll return today," he said.

She did not, and meanwhile more reports came in; more people had seen her so they believed, but investigation proved them wrong. Meanwhile the suspense mounted and my agony increased. I had heard of people disappearing and never returning—would Betsey be one of these? Lying in bed that night, I tried desperately to think of a place she might have gone—a friend, a relative, but we had no close relatives. That is why Mama, Papa, and the two of us had been such a tightly knit group. Mama's only sister had died two years before she did. Papa's two brothers were childless. Their parents were gone, and as for friends, Betsey had never tried to make any friends. With a little pang, I realized that she had been alone—terribly alone. A memory stirred in my mind but I could not bring it to the surface. I fell asleep trying, and in the morning I awakened with her image in my mind and her words in my ear. As I saw her, she was standing between my

parents' headstones and she was saying, "*You should have let me stay with them, Rissa. I wish you had.*"

The graveyard—the chapel! That is where she was—in the chapel! I was sure of it. If Caleb had not still been sleeping beside me, I should have gone to her immediately, but I dared not, for I wanted to see her alone. For her own protection, I had to see her alone and, thinking on it, I grew cold, wondering why I was so sure she needed protection.

In an agony of impatience, I waited for Caleb to rise. Finally, he did. He was pleased that I wanted to linger in bed. "You need your rest," he said solicitously. "The strain of these past few days has been terrible. Thank God, you're strong, Clarissa. Another woman might have . . ." he shuddered. "Nothing must happen to our baby."

"Nothing will," I told him gently. "I feel him, Caleb. I feel him living within me. It's such a beautiful feeling."

"Oh, my love." He kissed me. "I wish you hadn't to endure all this stress. Perhaps today we'll find her."

"I pray that you do." I sighed, wishing I might have told him about my plan.

"Poor Clarissa." He smoothed back my hair.

I caught his hand and bore it to my cheek. "Oh, Caleb," I said softly, "I love you so much."

His somber eyes lighted, "Do you, my dear?"

I thought of my revelation—how many days ago had it been? “Have I not told you so?” I cried. “Oh, Caleb, I do, I do with all my heart.”

The moments that passed between us after that were something to cherish but not to describe—suffice it to say that when he finally left me, I was totally happy, and it was only when I remembered my mission that my joy diminished. I had wanted to tell him everything, but I could not—not yet, not until I knew what lay behind my sister’s actions.

I did not leave the house until mid-morning, and when I did go, I stole down the stairs very quietly, praying that no one would see me. I was in luck. The hall was deserted. I slipped out the front door quickly and went down the drive, staying close to the trees that bordered it. As I went, I had the uneasy feeling that I was not alone, but that, I decided, was my conscience or my imagination, for when I turned to look, I saw no one. Still, in the interests of self-protection, I left the driveway and cut across the fields toward the hill on which lay the graveyard. It was difficult going, for the grass was drying and there were nettles that caught at my skirts and at the long cloak I had donned—also the sun was high and hot. It was proving to be a typical August day. By the time I had reached the path that led to the graveyard, I was tired and worried, wondering if, in my condition, I should have undertaken such exertion. But

even as I hesitated, I heard a sound that filled me with both exultation and fear—it was the neighing of a horse. Belcore? Gathering my skirts in my two hands, I trudged up the hill, falling exhausted at the top. As I lay there, trying to get my breath back, I had an uncomfortable memory of the fugitive whose curses had once resounded through these same woods and, above my own tortured breathing, I seemed to hear once more her agonized panting.

At length, I dragged myself to my feet and made my way through the copse to the graveyard. It was deserted and for a moment, I was daunted by the stillness—only the dead lay there. I was sure of it but then, I looked toward the chapel and, without knowing why, I was sure I would find Betsey in it. Opening the gate, I went inside, threading my way among the stones. As I approached the chapel door, it was flung open and Betsey stood on that shadowy threshold.

“I willed you to come, Clarissal” she said softly. “And here you are.”

I looked at her in horror—she had grown noticeably thinner, her green habit was dusty and stained, her hair hung lankly down her back, her eyes were sunken and filled with a strange brilliance. There was something about her that terrified me. However, I forced myself to say calmly, “Betsey, dear, we’ve been so worried about you. Why did you run away?”

"Why did I run away?" she repeated mockingly. Gesturing toward the door behind her, she continued, "Come where we may talk without interruption." She laughed soundlessly. "Imagine, Rissa, they were all around here, yesterday—the sheriff and his men, but they didn't find us. Belcore and I were in here and they never thought to look. I knew they wouldn't."

"Why . . . why didn't you let them know you were here, Betsey?" I faltered. "If you guessed they were looking for you . . . ?"

"I didn't want to be punished," she said. Turning abruptly, she slipped into the chapel. "Come in here, Rissa," her voice reached me with a hollow reverberating tone that added to my growing horror. "You needn't be afraid. Belcore's not here. He's out among the trees. Come."

Since I had no choice, I edged over the threshold, blinking in the sudden gloom. A second later, I saw her—she was curled up on one of the pews and she patted a space next to her. "Sit down," she invited. "You're very pale, Rissa. I expect the walk has wearied you."

I was very weary, but I lingered near the door. I needed air. It was very close in there—the odors of mold and damp mingling with the strong smell of horse manure made me ill. Furthermore, her words had puzzled and frightened me. "Why should you think they wanted to—punish you,

Betsey dear? They were searching for you at our request."

Another soundless laugh shook her. Clutching her knees, she rocked back and forth in the pew. Staring straight ahead of her, she said, "Last night, Belcore and I visited the ruins of Oakhurst. There was a full moon, you know. Very full and very bright. The destruction was complete, wasn't it? I could not even find the glass house or as Jared would say '*le jardin d'hiver*.'"

"You rode there . . . last night?" I said stupidly. "Why . . . what . . . ?"

"I expect the glass house was buried beneath the rubble," she mused. "I saw the roof fall on it . . . do you imagine it was completely crushed, the iron, too?"

"You . . . saw . . . it?" I whispered.

She smiled, "Yes, Belcore and I. Horses are usually afraid of fire, but he didn't make a sound or turn a hair. He's a wonderfully brave boy. I was very proud of him. I wanted to watch it burn and I did. It didn't take as long as I thought it would. There was such a high wind and the day was so hot."

I pushed myself against the wall, needing its support to hold me upright, to convince me that I wasn't dreaming. "You wanted to watch it burn?" I asked incredulously. "You *wanted* it, Betsey?"

"Yes," she nodded, "for now I don't have to live there. I didn't want to live there, Clarissa. I

told you so. I told Jared and Caleb, too, but none of you would listen and so I had to burn it down. I brought the matches with me and the bogeyman in the attic helped me . . . I know he did." She fastened her eyes on me. There was a strangely familiar look in them. I tried to place it; in a minute, I had succeeded—they had the wide unfocused stare of a leopard I had once seen in a zoo. It was a soulless look, a mad look, and, of course, she was mad. Somewhere I had heard that you needed to humor the mad—thus, when she said, "You do understand," I could answer calmly, "Yes, I do."

"But you don't," she accused. "I can see that you don't. You don't understand anything, Clarissa, you never have. It would have been easier if you and Jared had died in the fire."

"Betsey!" I gasped. "You . . . you don't know what you're saying!"

She did not heed me. "I was hoping you would die." Her face twisted. "I forgot that the house was all windows and that you could see the flames. If you'd died, Clarissa, I could have had Caleb."

"You . . . could have had . . . Caleb?" I whispered.

"Yes." The soulless look had fled—her eyes were full of tears. "I love him. I always have. As you loved Jared, Clarissa. Why don't you go away with Jared? I could make Caleb happy, no matter what he says, I could. All I need is the chance to

prove it. He didn't believe me, the other morning. He said I was nothing but a child, but when I kissed him, he knew I wasn't a child! Go away, Clarissa, please go away and let me have Caleb!"

She said a great deal more in the same vein, but I barely heeded her rambling words. At last, I was seeing her clearly. Mad she might be, but mad or sane, she made sense. Many incidents came to my mind. Betsey begging to be carried over the threshold at Colwell's Crossing that first day, her withdrawal from me, her elopement with Jared, and her inexplicable rejection of him—but it had not been inexplicable. I should have seen. I should have understood. Why hadn't I? Because I was too self-involved! I had told myself that I thought of Betsey, but I hadn't. I hadn't understood her at all. I was overcome with pity and shame. Moving to her, I bent down, trying to embrace her. "Betsey, my poor Betsey," I cried.

She thrust me back angrily, glaring at me, "Don't come near me!" she shrilled and, slipping from the pew, she ran to the door.

"My dear," I followed her. "I only want to help you."

"Help me!" she echoed. "Give me Caleb, that will help me!" Her mood changed abruptly from anger to pleading. "Jared would be kind to your child, Rissa. Jared loves children. He wanted me to have his child, fancy! But I would not lie with him. His touch made my flesh crawl. I hate him. I

thought he'd be like Caleb but he's not . . . he's not . . ." she began to weep.

"Betsey," I pushed open the door and went outside. "You must come with me, now. Come, my dearest." I put my hand on her arm. "We'll go home."

"I will go nowhere with you, Rissal!" Wrenching herself from my grasp, she darted through the graveyard to the far gate.

"Betsey!" I cried, hurrying after her, but she had gained the woods and disappeared among the trees. I heard the shrill neigh of Belcore, and a moment later, the sound of hooves. I could not follow her; I would have to go home and summon help. I made my way back down the hill and started to run across the field but I could not run, my condition precluded running. I slowed to a walk, endeavoring to take long steps. In the distance, I saw a man coming toward me. I raised my hand and yelled at him, but the cry had no sooner left my throat than I heard the neigh of a horse not too far behind me. Glancing back over my shoulder, I saw my sister riding after me across the field. One glimpse of her face told me what she had in mind. Terror chained me to the spot; then, desperately, I began to run while, behind me, the giant horse gained on me. I knew I had no chance. I knew that she would ride me down and trample us—I and the child within me, but still I ran, and as I did, there was a pounding in my ears

and in my throat, and oddly, I seemed to hear the baying of bloodhounds and men yelling, "Get her . . . get the witch . . . kill the witch." I could not catch my breath. There was no more breath left in me to catch. I stumbled, falling to my knees. I tried to rise, but my legs would not support me. My pursuers were almost upon me. I wanted to scream, but I could not scream. My voice was only a hoarse rasp in my throat.

"Curse you . . . curse you . . ." Did I whisper those words or were they in the air about me as I lay there, my face against the dry grasses and the stinging nettles, my heart, pounding, pounding, as I awaited certain death.

The hooves were coming nearer, thundering in my ears. They were close, very close, my pursuers, my pursuer. I could hear the snuffling pant of the horse and smell its sweat. Then, I heard a harsh cry. "Betsey, go back! Go back!"

A confused sound of running footsteps crashing through the grass, the maddened scream of a horse and a yell mingled together. Utilizing all my remaining strength, I pushed myself to my knees and through blurring eyes, I saw Jared hanging on to Belcore's bridle. Even as I looked, the stallion reared up, shaking himself free of Jared. At the same time, Betsey lost hold of her reins and with a despairing shriek slid to the ground just as the mighty horse plunged down upon her and then raced madly across the field.

"Don't look, Clarissa!" Jared yelled, throwing himself between me and my fallen sister, but he was a second too late, for I had looked, had seen her crushed body lying on the reddened grass. I wanted to faint. I should have fainted, but I remained conscious until I was in my bed and Dr. Lamb administered the merciful laudanum that for a time blotted out all memory.

When I was able to listen to him without weeping, I learned from Jared that Mrs. Curtis had been instrumental in saving my life. This woman, whom I had always distrusted, was actually fond of me and that same fondness had made her very protective—so protective that she had not even wanted her beloved Jared to return, fearing the resumption of our old passion. More observant than I, she had been aware of Betsey's love for Caleb and hatred of me. Thus, when she had seen me slip out of the house, she had unobtrusively followed me as I made my way across the field toward the graveyard. She had suspected I might be going to Betsy and she had been frightened enough to alert Jared to my actions. He had been equally alarmed and had immediately started after me.

"But you were so far away when I saw you!" I said.

"I know," he replied solemnly, "I can't imagine how I managed to run so fast. I felt as though

something were propelling me. I shall not question the how or the why of it—as you know, I am not a religious man, but if there is a God, I thank Him for letting me reach you in time.”

I had other reasons to thank the God Jared had partially acknowledged. Dr. Lamb said it was amazing I had not suffered a miscarriage, but I did not—and in October, my child was born—a blue-eyed girl with a tuft of pale blond hair. We have called her Betsey.

Last week, Jared and his wife, who was Helen Clare, came to see us at Colwell's Crossing. They brought their son Jeremy, who is three, the same age as my little Caleb. As Helen and I agreed, both boys have the Colwell look, which means they are the image of their fathers. We spent a lovely day together and at the end of it, I took the children to visit the old graveyard.

Having no conception of its real significance, they pronounced the chapel great fun and were all for playing hide-and-seek under its dusty pews, but I closed the door firmly against them and directed them to stay outside. It was then that Betsey, who has just learned her letters, found the stone that lies at the foot of my parents' graves.

“BETSEY LOVELL COLWELL,” she read in her clear voice. “Why that's my name, too!”

“Yes, dearest,” I replied, fondling her long golden curls.

"Was she a little girl like me?" my daughter replied.

"Just like you," I said softly and I meant it. Though the dates on the stone were "1854-1874" I knew that the girl I had loved so devotedly had joined my parents in death—leaving only a shell behind and now, they were all at peace.

FLORENCE STEVENSON, born in Los Angeles, studied literature and drama at USC and Yale. She has acted, written several plays that were produced across the country, been editor of a music journal, and contributed articles to numerous other magazines. Since Ophelia (1968) Ms. Stevenson has published seven books with NAL. She now lives in New York City.



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